

WHERE THE RIPPER PROWLED

The Victorian-era slasher proves to be a great tourist draw

BY CLAIRE BUSHEY || PHOTOGRAPHS BY DAVID COOK

It was darker than it should have been for the hour and latitude. It was only 7:30 p.m., but the clouds had flattened the sky, leaving only a band of sun at the horizon, turning London gloomy and, as usual, threatening rain.

The tourists had been instructed to meet near the Tower of London. With its own grim history of torture and execution, it seemed a fitting starting point for the two-hour walking tour through the City and East End. Tonight, as on

every night, some 40 or 50 people with a taste for blood would stalk the trail of Jack the Ripper.

The man leading tonight's party was Donald Rumbelow. He stood at the center of the crowd and encouraged those who couldn't hear to move forward.

"If you can't get through, treat this like a British Museum tour: Get your elbows out," he said.

Rumbelow, bespectacled and bulldog-like,



Donald Rumbelow leads walking tours through the part of London once terrorized by Jack the Ripper.

wore a flat cap and toted a wheeled suitcase filled with copies of his book, "The Complete Jack the Ripper." He is an authority on the subject. When Johnny Depp was filming "From Hell," Rumbelow showed him the sights. ("My daughter was incandescent with rage when she discovered it," he said.) His voice is like his name, deep and rumbling, a voice made for telling stories people want to hear.

The Ripper is the most popular tour run by London Walks. It's so popular, in fact, that the company's Web site warns against being duped by copycats; in the past impostors have redirected confused tourists looking for Rumbelow's tour.

The Ripper's body count is not as high as one might expect for such a famous

serial killer. There is some dispute over the number of victims, but the walking tour covers the "canonical five" murdered during the Autumn of Terror in 1888. It is not the number of killings that earned Jack his choke-hold on the public's imagination, but their grisliness.

The tour started at the Tower because it marks the line between the oldest part of the city – known as the One Square Mile, or simply the City, which is today the main financial sector – and the rest of London. The demarcation plays an important part in the Ripper's story, because the two areas were patrolled by separate police forces, which, at best, tried to ignore each other's existence. That intransigence hampered the investigation when the killer began

murdering on both sides of the line.

Rumbelow led his listeners into the rapidly emptying City. Few old structures remain in the district thanks to World War II German bombs, which damaged or destroyed a million homes in London.

But St. Botolph's Aldgate survived. Better known as the prostitutes' church, the working girls used to circle it nightly, looking for customers along the main thoroughfare it sat beside.

Of the many inaccuracies in the Jack the Ripper films, among the most entrenched is the glamorous portrayal of good-looking prostitutes, Rumbelow said. The films show them in taverns, dancing on tables in high heels, singing "isn't life good, isn't life great, isn't it



Several dozen people with a fascination for spilled blood gather every night to take the Ripper tour.

Travel

great to be an East End prostitute.”

It wasn't. Many were missing their teeth. They wore men's boots and all their clothes in order to keep warm. Customers paid two or three pennies or a crust of stale bread.

Rumbelow guided his charges to Mitre Square. In the cobbled square's southern corner, Jack the Ripper murdered Catherine Eddowes on Sept. 30 in the 15-minute span between the beat policeman's rounds. She was his fourth victim, and the second that night.

Before heading to the East End, Rumbelow advised the group to ignore any “friendly drunks” who thought they knew the Ripper tale better than he or who wanted to treat them to a mimed performance of the story, as had happened on a previous tour. One woman asked about pickpockets. He told her not to worry.

“I've had more prostitutes working the back of the group than pickpockets,” he says.

The rain started coming down, and the orange light from the street lamps went fuzzy. The group moved past shuttered buildings and graffiti, stopping by a building where Mary Kelly lived briefly before moving to another apartment, her last.

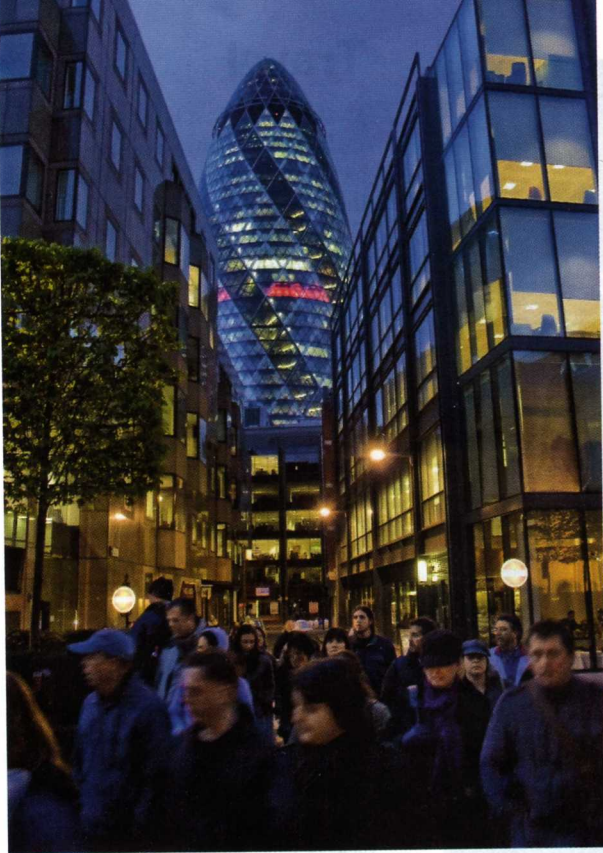
Sometime during the night of Nov. 9, Jack the Ripper entered Kelly's bedroom. He had several hours alone with her, Rumbelow said, and paused. The air had gotten colder.

The tour's one disappointment, if it can be called that, is Rumbelow's stubborn refusal to depart from the facts and name a suspect.

“If everyone who's been accused of being Jack the Ripper came back, they'd win a fortune in libel actions because there's not enough evidence to get anyone in a court of law,” he says.

But undoubtedly the story's ambiguous ending adds to its continued power to fascinate. The mystery has not been solved.

The tour was over. Rumbelow opened his suitcase, and his listeners eagerly handed over their money. But they didn't stay long. The Ten Bells, a 19th-century prostitutes' pub the victims may have frequented, was only a few blocks away, but no one headed over for a pint. They bought their books and left, walking quickly to the nearest Tube stop, escaping the rain and the darkness.



Not far from the area of the Jack the Ripper tour are modern buildings such as the distinctive "Gherkin."

Where to stay

The Savoy. With its location near the West End theater district and the Thames, plus a history that stretches back 100 years to include royal visits and some of the city's best parties, this is the address to stay at in London. Unfortunately, you can't. The Savoy closed in December 2007 for a \$200 million renovation and is scheduled to reopen this summer. You'll want to see it when it does. Think Art Deco, and think opulent. Past guests have included Winston Churchill, Marilyn Monroe, Elizabeth Taylor and Queen Elizabeth II. (www.fairmont.com/savoy).

Claridge's Hotel. "Not that I intend to die, but when I do, I don't want to go to heaven, I want to go to Claridge's," said actor Spencer Tracy. And really, who wouldn't? Located in tony Mayfair, the hotel played host to exiled European royals during World War II; the crown prince of the former Yugoslavia was born in Suite 212. Guests can stay in rooms designed with either the 19th century or the 1920s in mind, and, if requested, the hotel will provide pickup from the airport in either a Mercedes or Bentley. (www.claridges.co.uk/home/home.asp)

Sanderson. Not particularly English in the tea-and-crumpets sense, but oh so very sleek and modern. The hotel describes its décor as "a surreal Cocteau-like dream world." The polished pale floorboards of the lobby are dotted with twisted furniture in primary colors. Make sure to play a game or two in the billiards room with its fabulous contemporary stained glass window. (www.sandersonlondon.com/)

The Dorchester. You might not think of a fancy hotel as a place for a bachelor's party, but this is where Prince Philip had his in 1947. Nor is that The Dorchester's only claim to fame. In April 2007, The Tea Guild named The Dorchester's afternoon tea the best in the city, crediting the hotel's large tea selection and attentive service. There's also someone on staff whose sole responsibility is to help guests land tickets to their desired West End shows. (www.thedorchester.com/)

Renaissance Chancery Court. This Bloomsbury hotel a few blocks from The British Museum opened in 2003 and is pushing its way up among the top contenders. It is housed in a wedding cake of a building and has some of London's largest guest rooms. (www.marriott.com/hotels/travel/loncc-renaissance-chancery-court-london/)