



The Central Line

THE CORNHILL DEVILS

The devil is in the detail, literally so in the case of 54–55 Cornhill. Clad in placid pink terracotta, this late-Victorian building sits next door to the Wren church of St Peter's, and at first glance appears an unlikely receptacle for an immortalized vendetta. The architect was dragged into a territorial dispute with the rector over one foot of contested land, and compelled to redraw his plans. His revenge can be seen today: three demonic beasts who crouch on tiny perches in the façade, staring down at the doorway of St Peter's. Horns on their head and Stegosaurus plates on their backs – one made more monstrous



by a plump pair of breasts – the contorted bodies lean forward to hiss curses at churchgoers. One demon is thought to be a likeness of the obstinate clergyman in question. To be filed next to the shaving pot on Rome’s Trevi fountain, inserted to block the view of a nearby barber who heckled Nicola Salvi throughout its construction.



THE TILES OF DEBENHAM HOUSE

An ageing prostitute is haunted by the death of her daughter. Across town, a lunatic waif who is the daughter’s double lives alone in a ten-bedroom house after the death of her own mother – who in turn looked just like the prostitute – and one day the pair meet on the top deck of a number 27 bus ... if Joseph Losey’s 1968 film *Secret Ceremony* sounds like a cul-de-sac of nonsense, it’s because it is, but something about this nasty, psychotic little film stays with the viewer. Liz Taylor and Mia Farrow do their best with the outlandish premise but the film’s probable inspiration and true star, is the extraordinary house at 8 Addison Road.

Sometimes called Peacock House, it was built in 1907 for the owner of the famed department store (that’s Debenhams, not Peacocks). The startling exterior is clad in tiles of lustrous blue above green, framed by rows of cream terracotta. Art nouveau looked to nature, and these colours were chosen accordingly. The tiles match the sky and gardens, making the house seem a transparent spectre, or a René Magritte vision

that has materialized in Holland Park. With sensible stucco-fronted houses for its neighbours, Debenham House stands out as a cabaret drag act. The exotic interior boasts an inner dome of Byzantine mosaics, gold, greek lettering and zodiac animals straight from Ravenna. The house is not open to the public, but one can take in its exterior from the street, and peek through the gate down an arcaded walkway.



ABBEY MILLS PUMPING STATION

Today, dirty work is hidden behind a screen (probably advertising luxury goods). Few are prepared to tackle the messy, necessary jobs under our streets, ‘out of sight and out of mind’ being the principle. The Victorians allotted a bit more dignity to those whose labour kept London running. Joseph Bazalgette, creator of our sewer system, tackled the Great Stink of the mid-19th century like an evangelical preacher out to save souls. One of his pumping stations, sitting in the long grasses beyond the East End where the Lea River meets Bow Creek, has come to be known as ‘The Cathedral of Sewage’.

The shape is cruciform; above the roof is a polygonal dome which looks oddly Russian Orthodox, surrounded by four small stone turrets. Below these, each window is housed by a striped Romanesque arch. The design helps itself to elements from Byzantine, Moorish, Venetian, in the process coming off as Kazan-meets-Cordoba. The point is to sanctify the work

going on within. The best view of the station is to turn off Stratford High St along Greenway. Continuing to operate as a back-up, it is rigorously fenced off from the public. Early birds who book the few available appointments on Open House weekend can enjoy the equally decorative ironwork within.



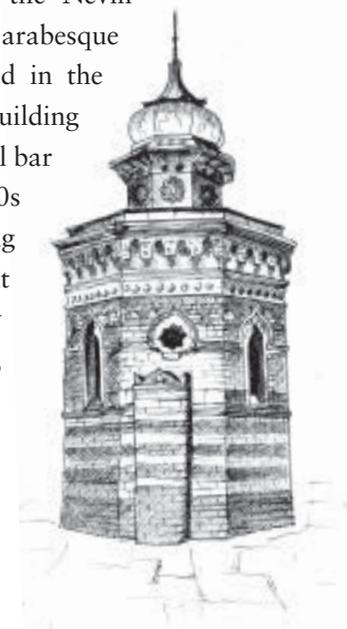
LEYTONSTONE HITCHCOCK MOSAICS

A prophet has no honour in his own country; if not underrated, Alfred Hitchcock has often been slightly misunderstood on these shores. Thought of in Britain as a maker of jaunty whodunnits, on the continent he is regarded as the classic auteur, who commanded the studio system to serve his disquieting, dazzling studies in obsession and madness. In 2001, his old manor of Leytonstone attempted to redress this by installing seventeen mosaics in the exit to the tube station.

The shower from *Psycho*, the bell tower from *Vertigo*, Cary Grant fleeing a crop-dusting plane or sneaking across a riviera rooftop, all your old favourites are there. It may not be high art but it's fun trying to identify each scene, and they are to be applauded for honouring Hitchcock over E11's other favourite son, David Beckham. The mosaics are in an Imperial Roman style rather than Byzantine or Arts and Crafts; the effect is dissonant, but gives them a blast of primitive energy. Assailed by crows, the blonde locks of Tippi Hedren become those of a shrieking Medusa.

TURKISH BATHS, BISHOPSGATE CHURCHYARD

Enter Bishopsgate Churchyard, one of the more pleasing green spaces in the City, and carry on past St Botolph's Church and the abstract sculptures installed between benches. You will find a narrow courtyard before Old Broad St, and at its centre a small kiosk fitted out like the garden shed of an Ottoman Sultan. Tiling in bands of cream and red at the base gives way to diverse shades of blue. Its three-sided front has small star windows, and longer ones with Venetian arches whose points curl slightly. The windows are bordered by elaborate decorative patterns in terracotta. On the roof is an onion dome in coloured glass, from which protrudes a star and a crescent. This singular little place originally served as an entrance to subterranean Turkish baths; one of five run by the Nevill brothers, this branch was given its arabesque makeover in 1895. The baths closed in the years of post-war austerity but the building periodically springs to life as a cocktail bar or a pizzeria (the obstinacy of one 1970s proprietor saved the building, forcing the high-rise office blocks to be built around it) and there is more fancy tiling downstairs. On my last visit, the only sign of life was a letter in the window advising that the leaseholder could collect his belongings from the bailiff.





The Northern Line

ST PANCRAS PUBLIC BATHS

Most large empires have turned to the Romans for their template, and the Victorians may have been thinking of the sacred springs at Bath when they began building public bath houses and wash houses. With the Industrial Revolution, the populations of cities doubled within a few decades and the poor were soon living their precarious lives in crowded, unsanitary conditions. The programme worked: adult mortality rates declined as a result.

St Pancras baths, actually in Kentish Town, lured the punters in by draping its façade with fantasia. A conical turret and a cupola topped by a spiked Prussian helmet bookend the roof, with high gables in between. The doorways are watched over by writhing Francis Bacon gargoyles, as classical figures lounge in the spandrels of the arch. Elsewhere, St George pins down his dragon, and St Pancras – beheaded by Dicoletian

at the age of fourteen – exacts his revenge by standing on a soldier. Best of all is the signage, a sinuous art nouveau font in gold, demarcating the two doorways as ‘Men’s First Class’ and ‘Men’s Second Class’. ’Twas ever thus, but we used to be more upfront about it. The baths still operate, a 2010 renovation paid for by converting some of the building into flats.



THE GHOST PLATFORMS OF PARKLAND WALK

Until 1954, the Great Northern Railway ran a suburban branch service from Finsbury Park to Alexandra Palace. In a rare reversion of the norm, mankind has relinquished its gains and handed the tracks back to the wild. Today, the Parkland Walk is a secluded, wooded dirt track covering the two miles between Finsbury Park and Highgate, much beloved of joggers and amateur filmmakers. There are still a few platforms where the trains used to stop, now swamped with moss, weeds and nettles. The tracks long gone, the platforms look bereft as they stare across at each other, entirely divorced from their original function. Could the flight of steps at either end be ziggurats leading to the sacrificial altars of a vanished civilization?

If it’s not quite Fordlandia, the post-apocalyptic feel is spooky and evocative. Linger here to wait for a train that will never come gives North Londoners a breather from gastropubs running ‘mother and baby’ sessions. Ultravox founder John Foxx walked it for inspiration when recording

his Ballardian masterpiece *Metamatic*, and Stephen King conceived the horror story *Crouch End* after a visit. Look out for the ‘green man’ of sculptor Marilyn Collins behind one platform, who emerges from a wall like the sculpture of Marcel Aymé in Montmartre, Paris. All sorts of scandalous goings-on are rumoured to happen here after dark; proceed with caution.



LIZZIE SIDDAL, HIGHGATE CEMETERY

Highgate Cemetery is as much of a Who’s Who for star-spotters as Père Lachaise in Paris. Some of the most famous names of the Victorian age, such as Karl Marx or George Eliot, were laid to rest here, and the practice continues today; recent arrivals include the wacky Bugs Bunny allusion of Malcolm McLaren’s tombstone, and the poisoned spy Alexandr Litvinenko, buried in an airtight lead coffin to prevent radioactive leaks. One of the more macabre stories within these gates is that of Lizzie Siddal. Wife to Dante Gabriel Rossetti and muse of the Pre-Raphaelites, she made an elegant model for such famous paintings as Millais’ *Ophelia*. Siddal fell into illness, depression and a laudanum addiction, and died of an overdose aged thirty-two. A grieving Rossetti enclosed in the coffin his only copy of the love poems he had written her. Seven years later, Rossetti was an alcoholic himself, struggling to paint or write. His literary agent persuaded him that Lizzie’s coffin should be exhumed to retrieve the poems. In a twist worthy of Luis Buñuel, witnesses reported that the