

1-1-1988

## London

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### Recommended Citation

Whitehill, Sharon (1988) "London," *Grand Valley Review*: Vol. 4: Iss. 1, Article 20.

Available at: <http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/gvr/vol4/iss1/20>

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## London

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SHARON WHITEHILL

For five weeks this past summer fourteen GVSU students, ranging in age from seventeen to sixty-two and with interests ranging from library science to theater to history to language arts, participated in our first-ever summer study in England program. At Kingston Polytechnic, a college much like Grand Valley, we undertook a six-credit course of study: three credits on the Victorian Age (its social customs, arts and crafts, gardens, and architecture, as well as its writers, painters, politicians, and criminals) and three credits for keeping a detailed, ongoing travel journal.

Kingston Polytechnic is located in the Royal Borough of Kingston-on-Thames, once a Saxon capital (you can still see its Coronation Stone), along a beautiful stretch on the south bank of the river for which it is named. What follows is a joint letter, from the original fourteen participants and me.

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Now that we've been in London for about a month we've adjusted to life in England pretty well, though it's still new enough even now to continue challenging our American assumptions, habits, and tastes. There are a lot of stories to tell.

Many of us chose to come to England because we wanted the advantages of foreign travel without having to learn the language. English is English, we reasoned — but we were mistaken. “Here they speak British-English,” Kristin Rowe explains; “there we speak American. Since my arrival I've had countless misunderstandings — and laughter.” Some typical examples: “Never ask for a pop — they won't know what it is. You have to ask for a specific kind: Coca-cola, or Schwepp's. Don't ask for pop tarts, either; they'll think you want a bouncy prostitute.”

Language peculiarities — at least to American ears — extend to names and signs. Sharon Whitehill, our program director, has some favorites from previous trips (the restaurant in Covent Garden called “The Crusting Pipe,” and the signs warning dog-walkers not to let their canines “foul the roadway”) and some brand new discoveries: a pub called “The Slug and Lettuce,” a cottage named “Toad Croak Hall,” a street named “Seething Wells Lane.” Motorists near the Houses of Parliament are cautioned to drive “Dead Slow,” while a sign near a South London cemetery warns “Parking

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for Residents Only.”

Driving and parking were *not* among the adjustments we had to make; London, thank goodness, is a city for walking. Even when using its excellent transport system you can, should, and will walk to the bus stop or train or tube station. You’ll also walk while changing trains before your final destination: through corridors and tunnels, on and off escalators and lifts, up and down stairs. And you’ll walk when you emerge above-ground: to and past and through cathedrals, museums, galleries, gardens, parks, and even entire districts. So as Joyce Wilkins suggests, “it does pay to get your feet toughened up before you come.”

Like the rest of us, Monica Vetter was at first surprised by all the walking, and rather intimidated by public transport. “The dorms are fifteen minutes from the train station, fifteen minutes from the school, and even farther from shopping in Kingston,” she notes, “and once you’re in London you walk a lot too.” But also like the rest of us, Monica found that the London Underground can be an adventure in itself. From mumbling old ladies to dirty old men, from young lovers to tired mothers, from raucous Italian teenagers to earnest Canadian tourists, from punks to punctilious city accountants, there is always a sense of human drama down in the tube. There was the furious young woman, for example, who delivered this verbal blast: “What’s so fascinating about my boobs, you silly bitch?” No one ever did figure out whom she was talking to — in fact we might have been witnessing part of a “Tube Theater” production, where the audience follows along and observes commuters’ reactions to actors who portray highly eccentric passengers.

“Tube Theater” succeeds, of course, precisely because of strict Underground protocol: you must keep to the right on stairs and escalators so that those in a hurry can rush up or down on the left; you must stand clear of the doors of the train even when you’re squeezed like a sardine. And Victoria Artt learned another rule, this one tacit: an unescorted woman must never be open even to polite conversation. “I felt like I had a sign on my forehead,” she says: “‘If you’re weird I want to talk to you.’” One day a man sat next to Victoria in an almost empty car and promptly began to sing. “Not loud, mind you, but real low under his breath, and he was rocking to the beat. He sang two lines — the chorus from Pink Floyd’s ‘The Wall’ — over and over again. For four stops. By the time we got to Waterloo I thought I was going to go stark raving mad.”

On another occasion Victoria and a man with purple hair simultaneously noticed a mouse running across the tracks in the Piccadilly Circus station.

“That’s a mouse,” whispered the man.

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“Yes,” Victoria whispered back, even as she asked herself why they were whispering. “I’ll catch it for you,” offered the man.

“Ah, no, I don’t really want a mouse.”

By now Victoria was inching away. But the man inched right along with her, talking all the while; and when the next train came he followed her into the same car. Victoria waited until the doors were closing, jumped nimbly off the train, and was only too happy to wait for another.

“You’ll enjoy yourself most when you stop comparing everything you encounter here to the good old American way,” says Angelia Groom. Nothing can really prepare you for all that you’ll find in London. But three things can carry you through: a heart for adventure, a positive spirit, and a genuinely open mind.