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Great Britain: You Can Walk Across It On the Grass

(See Cover)

In this century, every decade has had its city. The fin de siècle belonged to the dreamlike round of Vienna, capital of the inbred Habsburgs and the waltz. In the changing '20s, Paris provided a moveable feast for Hemingway, Picasso, Fitzgerald and Joyce, while in the chaos after the Great Crash, Berlin briefly erupted with the savage iconoclasm of Brecht and the Bauhaus. During the shell-shocked 1940s, thrusting New York led the way, and in the uneasy 1950s it was the easy Rome of la dolce vita. Today, it is London, a city steeped in tradition, seized by change, liberated by affluence, graced by daffodils and anemones, so green with parks and squares that, as the saying goes, you can walk across it on the grass. In a decade dominated by youth, London has burst into bloom. It swings; it is the scene.

This spring, as never before in modern times, London is switched on. Ancient elegance and new opulence are all tangled up in a dazzling blur of op and pop. The city is alive with birds (girls) and beatles, buzzing with minicars and telly stars, pulsing with half a dozen separate veins of excitement. The guards now change at Buckingham Palace to a Lennon and McCartney tune, and Prince Charles is firmly in the longhair set. In Harold Wilson, Downing Street sports a Yorkshire accent, a working-class attitude and a tolerance toward the young that includes Pop Singer "Screaming" Lord Sutch, who ran against him on the Teen-Age Party ticket in the last election. Mary Quant, who designs those clothes, Vidal Sassoon, the man with the magic comb, and the Rolling Stones, whose music is most In right now, reign as a new breed of royalty. Disks by the thousands spin in a widening orbit of discotheques, and elegant saloons have become gambling parlors. In a once sedate world of faded splendor, everything new, uninhibited and kinky is blooming at the top of London life.

London is not keeping the good news to itself. From Carnaby Street, the new, way-out fashion in young men's clothes is spreading around the globe, and so are the hairdos, the hairdon'ts and the sound of beat; in Czechoslovakia alone, there are 500 beat groups, all with English names. London is exporting its plays, its films, its fads, its styles, its people. It is also the place to go. It has become the latest mecca for Parisians who

are tired of Paris, where the stern and newly puritanical domain of Charles de Gaulle holds sway. From the jets that land at its doors pour a swelling cargo of the international set, businessmen, tourists—and just plain scene-makers.

Ingenuity of Indulgence. The new vitality of the city amazes both its visitors and inhabitants. "The planet which was England," confided Paris' Candide recently, "has given birth to a new art of living—eccentric, bohemian, simple and gay." Says Robert Fraser, owner of London's most pioneering art gallery: "Right now, London has something that New York used to have: everybody wants to be there. There's no place else. Paris is calcified. There's an indefinable thing about London that makes people want to go there."

Not everyone looks upon London's new swing as a blessing. For many who treasure an older, quieter London, the haystack hair, the suspiciously brilliant clothes, the chatter about sex and the cheery vulgarity strike an ugly contrast with the stately London that still persists in the quieter squares of Belgravia or in such peaceful suburbs as Richmond. They argue that credulity and immorality, together with a sophisticated taste for the primitive, are symptoms of decadence. The Daily Telegraph's Anthony Lejeune two weeks ago decried "aspects of the contemporary British scene which have not merely surprised the outside world but which increasingly provoke its contempt and derision. To call them symptoms of decadence may be facile as an explanation, but it has a disturbing ring of truth." Tradition-loving Londoners like to cite John Ruskin's eloquent description of 16th and 17th century Venice, another aging empire built on maritime power: "In the ingenuity of indulgence, in the varieties of vanity, Venice surpassed the cities of Christendom, as of old she had surpassed them in fortitude and devotion."

The comparison is fair, if not perfectly apt. Britain has lost an empire and lightened a pound. In the process, it has also recovered a lightness of heart lost during the weighty centuries of world leadership. Much of the world still thinks of Britain as the land of Victorianism, but Victorianism was only a temporary aberration in the British character, which is basically less inhibited than most. London today is in many ways like the cheerful, violent, lusty town of William Shakespeare, one of whose happiest songs is about "a lover and his lass, that o'er the green cornfield did pass." It is no coincidence that critics describe London's vibrant theater as being in the midst of a second Elizabethan era, that one number on the Rolling Stones' newest LP is a mock-Elizabethan ballad with a harpsichord and dulcimer for accompaniment, or that Italian Novelist Alberto Mo ravia describes the British cinema today as "undergoing a renaissance."

Bloodless Revolution. Today, Britain is in the midst of a bloodless revolution. This time, those who are giving way are the old Tory-Liberal Establishment that ruled the Empire from the clubs along Pall Mall and St. James's, the still-powerful financial City of London, the church and Oxbridge. In their stead is rising a new and surprising leadership community; economists, professors, actors, photographers, singers, admen, TV executives and writers—a swinging meritocracy. What they have in common is that they are mostly under 40 (Harold Wilson, at 50 the youngest P.M. of the century, is referred to as "good old 'arold") and come from the ranks of the British lower middle and working class, which never before could find room at the top. Says Sociologist Richard Hoggart, 47, himself a slum orphan from industrial Leeds: "A new group of

people is emerging into society, creating a kind of classlessness and a verve which has not been seen before."

Who are these men and women? Many of them come from the Midlands, from Yorkshire, Manchester and Birmingham, sporting their distinct regional accents like badges—it is no longer necessary to affect an Oxford accent to get ahead. Some of the new voices have a cockney lilt; from London's own working-class East End come Actors Michael Caine and Terence Stamp, Playwrights Arnold Wesker and Harold Pinter, Television Magnate Lew Grade, Textilemen Joe Hyman and Nikki Seekers. Others breeze in from the coal-mining North Country. There are bluff Yorkshiremen like the P.M. or Actor Peter O'Toole, Albert Finney from Manchester, Playwright Shelagh Delaney, who wrote A Taste of Honey in Salford at the age of 18, and Rita Tushingham, 24, a onetime Liverpool typist who played the lead in the 1961 movie. And, of course, Liverpool also produced the four ingenuous teen-agers whose Mersey beat has circled the world, earned them a group fortune that now stands at $6,000,000 and won them medals from Queen Elizabeth.

Foppish Dress. Though London's pendulum now swings with verve and elan, it started to move, as near as anyone can tell, during the Suez crisis of 1956, which many Britons found darker even than the days of the 1940 Blitz. Angry thousands massed among the pigeons beneath Nelson's glowering statue in Trafalgar Square to protest an aging, ailing Tory Prime Minister's final, futile attempt to assert Britannia's right to rule the waves. That same year produced the first explosive act of rebellion: John Osborne's corrosive drama, Look Back in Anger.

Other signs of revolt soon cropped up. Teen-age gangs hit the streets, dressed in sleazy imitations of Edwardian frock coats. The Teddy boys mixed it up in angry race riots with West Indians, who were crowded into rundown districts like Paddington and Netting Hill Gate. Next, boys and girls divided up into foppishly dressed Mods and leather-jacketed Rockers, took to Brighton and Margate on holiday weekends to have a bit of a rumble while their elders rocked with still greater shock over the seamy revelations of the Profumo affair. Suddenly, with Profumo, the veneer of the upper classes finally and irreparably cracked. The working-class man saw that the Tories were not necessarily better or even better-behaved than he just because they appeared to be so. One result was a razor-thin margin of victory for Harold Wilson in 1964.

The Establishment's influence has not disappeared, of course, but much of the Establishment has joined the swinging London atmosphere, encouraged by the likes of Princess Margaret and Antony Armstrong-Jones. Part of that atmosphere is the result of the simple friction of a young population on an old seasoned culture that has lost much of its drive. Youth is the word and the deed in London—and well it should be: nearly 30% of its population is in the 15-34 age bracket, far more than the rest of the country as a whole. This new generation has grown up with fewer class inhibitions and, equally important, amid rising affluence. Money is much of what makes London go, go, go. "When I was a kid," says Actor Terry Stamp, "I was indoctrinated with the idea of a job that would pay a pension at 55. Now the kids are prepared to spend what they've got. As a working-class boy, there's a real barrier in the mind. It's so strange to be able to do things. There has been a fantastic opening of horizons."

Dazzling Gems. To the lively Londoner, no explanations are really necessary. Talking the flip jargon that has become basic English for teenagers, jet setters and indeed any knowledgeable adult striving to maintain the illusion that he is at least young in heart, the switched-on London bird or beatle calls his urb "super," "fab," "groovy," "gear," "close" or "with it." "Ready, steady, go. There's a Whole Scene Going," chirps Cathy McGowan, 22, moderator on ITV's Ready, Steady Go show and London's favorite "dolly" of the moment, doing a deliberate "sendup" (takeoff) on the title of her own and the nation's other top pop TV show, There's a Whole Scene Going.

In fact, there is not one London scene, but dozens. Each one is a dazzling gem, a medley of checkered sunglasses and delightfully quaint pay phone boxes, a blend of "flash" American, polished Continental and robust old English influence that mixes and merges in London today. The result is a sparkling, slapdash comedy not unlike those directed for the screen by Britain's own Tony (Tom Jones) Richardson or Czech Emigre Karel (Morgan!) Reisz, and filmed by Director Richard (Help!) Lester, a fugitive from Philadelphia, who uses the sudden stills and the hurry-up time that he learned filming advertising commercials for U.S. TV.

If Lester were scripting the action that took place in London last week, five storyboards might look like this:

· SCENE ONE. Jack Aspinall's Clermont Club on Berkeley Square, located in an 18th century town house, small, plush and, since it opened in 1962, almost incredibly exclusive (the membership fee of $84 a year is a trifle compared with the need for the "proper credentials"). Time: a weekday night. After a late, after-the-theater supper with friends at Annabel's, London's leading discothèque (which happens to be right downstairs), the handsome son of a peer breezes up for "a spot of chemmy." Chairs are found for his group to watch; drinks are passed. In three hours, playing with flair, he wins $210,000. Satisfied, but not flaunting his coup, he departs. But before the chauffeur can wheel his Bentley out from all the others, the Right Honourable realizes that he forgot to get a chit for his winnings. He goes back. Tempted by his luck, he tries another few shoes. Two hours later he has lost $450,000.

· SCENE TWO. Saturday afternoon in Chelsea. Up from the Sloane Square tube station swarm the guys and dollies, girls in miniskirts (three to six inches above the knee) or bell-bottom trousers. The morning has been spent "raking" among the Edwardian bric-a-brac, dusty candelabra and other antiques in the stalls on Portobello Road. Now, as if by a common instinct, the whole flock homes in on King's Road, site of such bird boutiques as Bazaar, and Granny Takes a Trip, as well as Hung On You, the "kinkiest" (wildest) men's shop, which features "The '30s Look": George Raft lapels, Bogart fedoras, Al Capone boutonnieres. The sport of the day is mainly sauntering, not shopping, but, as Cathy McGowan explains, "it's a very serious business. The point is to show off your close gear, and you have to do it in the proper style." Cathy, with Mick Jagger, 21, lead vocalist for the Rolling Stones, stops in at the Guys and Dolls coffeehouse, where a pretty blonde teenager, her yellow and black P.V.C. (polyvinyl chloride) miniskirt hiked high over patterned stockings, perches staring at a copy of the French Vogue. Mick leans over her. She beams. "Luv," he says, "you've got it upside down."

· SCENE THREE. Also Saturday afternoon in Chelsea, at Le Reve restaurant. Wolfing down a quick lunch are some of the most switched-on young men in town: Actor Terence Stamp, 26, star of The Collector and steady date of Model Jean Shrimpton; Actor Michael Caine, 33, the Mozart-loving spy in The Ipcress File; Hairdresser Sassoon, 38, whose cut can be seen both at Courreges in Paris and on Princess Meg; Ace Photographer David Bailey, 27, professional associate of Antony Armstrong-Jones; and Doug Haywood, 28, Chelsea's "in-nest" private tailor. The conversation revolves about the evils of apartheid because the waiter has brought a pack of South African cigarettes, but it lacks heat, since everyone agrees that Verwoerd is a boor. Besides, the big concern of the group is the Chelsea soccer team's match, scheduled for this afternoon. They are the team's most ardent rooting squad, meeting every Saturday for lunch and the trip to the stadium. Chelsea has long been "a joke team," the New York Mets of the football circuit, but lately it has been winning, and, says Haywood, "we're seriously thinking of switching our allegiance to Fulham, making that the In team."

· SCENE FOUR. Jane Ormsby Gore, 23, daughter of the former British Ambassador to the U.S., and a fashion assistant on British Vogue. Clad in tightly fitted, wine-red flared Edwardian jacket over a wildly ruffled white lace blouse, skintight, black bell-bottom trousers, silver-buckled patent leather shoes, ghost-white makeup and tons of eyelashes, she pops in to a cocktail party, not unlike the one Julie Christie goes to in Darling, at Robert Eraser's art gallery on Duke Street. There she sees Fashion Designer Pauline Fordham in a silver metallic coat, Starlet Sue Kingsford in a two-piece pink trouser suit with a lovely stretch of naked turn, Los Angeles-born Pop Artist Jann Haworth Blake, Detroit-born Negro Model Donyale Luna. Later, with Michael Rainey, 25, owner of Hung On You, she dances at Dolly's discothèque in Jermyn Street, where the deafening beat comes from the Action, the Stones, the Who, the Animals, the Mindbenders, and Cilia Black, and the right drink (at 98¢) is Campari and soda—because it is red and tickles. Dances have no names in London any more. "You just dance, do the dance, whatever you feel like," says Jane, adding candidly that the reason couples in Dolly's don't spend much time necking is because "they usually live fulfilled sex lives."

· SCENE FIVE. A brightly lit Georgian town house in Kensington, with limousines, M.G.s and Jags rolling up. Gamine Leslie Caron, 34, unquestionably this season's most with-it hostess (the last party ran from Vanessa Redgrave and John Huston to the Henry Fords), awaits this Saturday's guests. There are shrieks of "darling!" and elaborate embraces for Marlon Brando, Prince Stanislas Radziwill and Lee, Roddy McDowall, Terry Southern, Francoise Sagan and Barbra Streisand (who opens in Funny Girl this week). Dame Margot Fonteyn is due. Warren Beatty, Caron's most recent co-star (in Promise Her Anything), is there. After an excellent dinner of chicken, claret and Chablis, the 28 guests dance till dawn.

So it goes, scene upon scene upon scene, one little square of activity abutting and reinforcing the next, like the parks of London themselves. Even the physical city seems to shift and change under the impetus of the new activity. Throughout London, wreckers and city planners are at work. Once a horizontal city with a skyline dominated by Mary Poppins' chimney pots, London is now shot through with skyscrapers, including the 30-story London Hilton and the 620-ft. London post office tower. Westminster Abbey's statues and

memorial have been newly cleaned and painted, and the dome of St. Paul's Cathedral is undergoing a $420,000 polishing that will return it to the splendor envisioned by Sir Christopher Wren—and, hopefully, keep it that way, since electric-shock pigeon deterrents are being added. London Bridge is falling down, and plans have been drawn for a $6,700,000 replacement.

More important than all the other changes is the fact that the center, the heart of London, has gravitated slowly westward to the haunts of the city's new elite, just as it did in centuries gone by. The ancient Tower, built by the Norman Plantagenets, gave way to the thriving guildhalls of the medieval City of London just up the Thames. The city yielded to neighboring Westminster and ultimately to the symbol of Victoria's empire, Buckingham Palace. After its latest shift, London's heart has come to rest somewhere in Mayfair, between the green fields and orators of Hyde Park and the impish statue of Eros in Piccadilly Circus.

A large slice of London's 2,400,000 young adults and working teen-agers live in Chelsea, Earl's Court and South Kensington, the residential districts roughly comparable to Manhattan's upper East Side. While the models and ad agency execs can afford quaint private houses, with black-painted doors and tidy flower boxes, the lesser lights pack themselves into shared flats (three or four to an apartment) that cost a minimum of $30 a month, or nest in "bedsitters" (furnished rooms, $10 a week). "Youth has become emancipated," says Mick Jagger, "and the girls have become as emancipated as the boys."

Dirty Dick's. No other city offers a wider variety of ways in which to pass the time, and Londoners pursue their pleasures as relentlessly as people anywhere in the world. London has hundreds of pleasant pubs with such charming names as the Bricklayers' Arms, Coal Hole, Crown and Two Chairmen, Dandy Roll and Dirty Dick's, but the two current favorites among the In set are the Cross-Keys and the King's Head and Eight Bells. Dozens of nightclubs offer totally uninhibited striptease, including Raymond's Revue Bar, sizzling in Soho, where the current attraction is an Australian blonde named Rita Elen, who does her exotic dancing with a full-grown live cheetah named Ginni.

The three reigning discothèques are close to Piccadilly; beside Dolly's and its rival The Scotch, Annabel's seems daintily restrained, but for that reason may be the most elegant of all; it has a series of wine-cellar rooms and a softly tuned stereo that alternates Sinatra and Ella with the native Animals and Stones. At these and dozens of other discothèques, beautiful gals with long blonde hair and slimly handsome men go gracefully through their explosive, hedonistic, totally individual dances, surrounded by mirrors so that they can see what a good time they're having.

Londoners are among the world's sportiest gamblers, willing to wager on everything from the greyhounds to whether or not the sun will shine (a hazardous bet, since the daily mean is only 4.16 hours of sunshine in the city). The Clermont Club, Crockford's and the Curzon House Club are the kings of the $3 billion-a-year fever, reigning over tables at which men and women do not gamble because they are on holiday, as they might at Deauville or Baden, but as part of their casual daily entertainment. It is not exceptional to see players win or lose $50,000 or so of an evening. Since gambling was legalized in 1960, it has been taken up

by just about everyone. Little old ladies now venture their shillings in flourishing bingo halls like the Burnt Oak off Edgware Road, and Britons placed $7,000,000 worth of bets on the March 31 election.

The city that once had the worst dining out in the Western world now has a variety and a class of restaurants that rival New York or even Paris. The little restaurants of Soho are unpretentious but ever so In, beginning with the Trattoria Terrazza (especially its downstairs Positano Room). Tiberio's in Mayfair, with its band and dancing, draws the smart set for later dinners, and other popular In spots are the Mirabelle in Mayfair, L'Etoile and the White Tower in Bloomsbury. London's restaurants and clubs are, of course, famed for their superb wine cellars, and wine is a frequent companion at lunch. A new eating style is visible on all sides. In a tough workingman's neighborhood in Camden Town, a sign on a pub wall announces: "Cockles, Mussels and Scampi."

Fear in Manhattan. Perhaps nothing illustrates the new swinging London better than narrow, three-block-long Carnaby Street, which is crammed with a cluster of the "gear" boutiques where the girls and boys buy each other clothing. Nine of the shops for boys on Carnaby Street are owned by Designer John Stephen, 29, who last week took his tattersall shirts, Dutch boy caps, form-fitting pants and vinyl vests to Manhattan to put the fear of God into parents there. As for the girls, the most In shop for gear is Biba's boutique in Kensington, which is a must scene for the switched-on dolly-bird at least twice a week. Designer Barbara Hulanicki, owner of Biba's, estimates that a typical secretary or shop girl, earning $31 a week, will spend at least $17 of it on clothing, which leaves her with a cup of coffee for lunch—but happy.

Today, as Cathy McGowan points out, "the war is over. The Mods have won." Nothing is so Out, so totally not with it, as greasy dungarees and black leather jackets (though a few rebels still hang around, disconsolately gunning their motorcycles). The latest In look for girls is the very skinny look, striped jersey dresses, a lot of yellow, trench coats, berets (especially knitted ones), granny shoes (mostly yellow, please) and big earrings. Just as the '30s look is already returning for men (wider ties, big lapels, black and white shoes), some fashion designers believe that it is on its way for women and will force their hemlines down again.

Dirty, Filthy, Healthy. The same experimentation, the same passion for change, permeates London's theater, which is currently the best anywhere in the world. The theater is one of the strongest cultural contributors to the liveliness of London today, brimming with new ideas and with new young people who are nonetheless working within a long and powerful creative tradition. Says Peter Hall of the Royal Shakespeare Company: "We are in a theater that is front-page news. We are denounced as subversive, immoral, filthy —it's all terribly healthy." John Osborne is one of the world's richest playwrights, though still as acid as ever: his latest, A Patriot for Me, is all about homosexuality in decadent Vienna.

There are as many as 40 or 50 plays on the London stage in any given week, and it costs little more to see one than to go to a movie. However, says Peter Hall, "we've got rid of that stuffy middle-aged lot that go to the theater as a sop for their prejudices. We're getting a younger audience who are looking for experiences

and will take them from the latest pop record or Hamlet." The In Hamlet this year is David Warner, 24, who plays the Dane with Beatle haircut and a Carnaby Street slouch.

This spring, film makers from all over the world have been attracted to London by its swinging film industry, whose latest export to the U.S. is Morgan!, a hilarious piece of insanity. Charlie Chaplin is making The Countess from Hong Kong with Marlon Brando and Sophia Loren. Francois Truffaut is just finishing Fahrenheit 451 with Julie Christie and Oskar Werner. Roman Polanski is making a horror satire called The Vampire Killers. Robert Aldrich is starting up a war film called The Dirty Dozen, and Sidney Lumet is working with Maximilian Schell, James Mason and Simone Signoret in The Deadly Affair. For the past several weeks, Michelangelo Antonioni has been prowling the streets of London, looking toward making a film on—of all things—the swinging London scene. His cryptic testimonial to what he has seen: "London offers the best and the worst in the world."

Greenness & Greyness. For all its virtues, which are many, and its faults, which are considerable, London has a large measure of that special quality that was once the hallmark of great cities: civility in the broadest sense. It takes away less of a person's individuality than most big cities, and gives the individual and his rights more tolerance than any. In texture, it has developed into a soft, pleasant place in which to live and work, a city increasing its talents for organizing a modern society without losing the simple humanity that so many urban complexes lack.

Melvin J. Lasky, a London-based co-editor of Encounter, believes that "London is the only European metropolis that has managed to maintain a combination of greenness and greyness, vitality and yet a certain gentleness. Paris hasn't got it. Rome is oppressive, Berlin is a special case. And all the others are villages." London's pressures are less than in many big cities, and it manages to maintain an ease, a coziness and a mixture of its different social circles that totally eludes New York. The result, as Manhattan-born Richard Adler, editor of London's Town Magazine, puts it, is that London is "far more accessible than anywhere else. In New York, Paris and Rome, actors, writers and so on each have their own little groups, their little street packs. If you put your toe in the wrong square, you get stepped on. In London, everyone parties with everyone."

That is a quality that Londoners themselves appreciate, for, while it existed 30 years ago in the world of the old Establishment—where the dukes, politicians, prelates, publishing lords, financiers and industrialists all knew one another—it is still truer today in the new society. The London that has emerged is swinging, but in a far more profound sense than the colorful and ebullient pop culture by itself would suggest. London has shed much of its smugness, much of the arrogance that often went with the stamp of privilege, much of its false pride—the kind that long kept it shabby and shopworn in physical fact and spirit. It is a refreshing change, and making the scene is the Londoner's way of celebrating it.