

David Tucker owns [London Walks](#) with his wife Mary. Described by Time Out as ‘London’s best guided walks’ and by Fodor’s as ‘the first and best of the walking tour firms’, it offers over 500 different walks. I’ve enjoyed many of these myself over the years, including the Hampstead one that I wrote about in [Royal Cowbells](#). I was interested to find out how an American Mid-Westerner came to own this quintessentially English business and so David agreed to meet me for a chat at the Café in the Crypt underneath St Martin-in-the-Fields.



How did you end up in London, David?

Well, I grew up in Wisconsin and came here in '73 to do a PhD on Dickens at UCL. I was in my early twenties and thought I'd be here for two years, get my PhD and then go back to the US and 'profess away'. But there's an old military axiom that Bush and Blair spectacularly rediscovered; no battle plan survives contact with the enemy. I knew after about six weeks that I'd found the place I wanted to spend the rest of my life. And I was aware that most of my British contemporaries had a head start of about two decades. I wanted to figure this place out. I wanted to find out about London. To catch up.

What was it that grabbed you about London?

I'd spent the summer of '69 in Manhattan. But I was a small town kid; the place in the Mid-West where I grew up, had about 5,000 people. And that summer in Manhattan I spent most of the summer feeling tiny. I remember, too, towards the end, turning into 34th Street at about six in the evening. I suddenly saw the sun like a blob of red butter, sinking and setting, and I realised I hadn't seen a sunset in two months. I thought 'my God, I've got to get out of this place'. When I came here to London, it was a simple thing but the architecture is on a human scale. It's a cliché, but thank goodness it's true... and there's the village character... I didn't feel overwhelmed by London.

There were other things as well that had to do with the time. It was the early '70s... the Vietnam War. I'd spent two or three years absolutely horrified about all of that and thinking that maybe I was going to be drafted. That's all we talked about, that generation, that's all we thought about. And then I got here and I was able to talk about books. And I love books. It was like a load was lifted off me.

How did you get involved with London Walks?

I discovered London Walks fairly early on. I was going on them as a paying customer because I wanted to figure the place out. After a while I thought "I could do that... I'd *like* to do that". Now, the owner didn't want an American guide, for obvious reasons. But I knew something about Dickens and he wanted to put on Dickens walks, so that was how I got my foot in the door. It was in the autumn of 1980 that I started guiding, with a Dickens walk from Tower Hill. You know I'm part of that generation of English Lit graduates for whom the job market went really South; 800 PhDs for every position. But for me Dickens was a life changer. I got into London walks because of Dickens. In a sense my children wouldn't have existed without Dickens because he brought me over here.

How did you get to own London Walks?

When I joined as a guide, London Walks was doing about 32 walks and had about a dozen guides. And you just knew there were going to be 25 people that turned out for each walk. Lower than that and it was a bad day. But about 1984, London Walks hit a really bad patch. We got something which we'd never had - serious competition. The dollar got very strong against the pound and people got it into their heads that there was money to be made from visiting Americans. And a walking tour company was pretty easy to start. It still is. You don't need any plant or anything like that, you just have to get some printing done. Some of the competitors were really aggressive and they promoted and pushed so no one was turning up for us and we went down to about four walks a week with just a few guides. The owner of London Walks was a banker with a couple of little kids and lived up in Hertfordshire so it was difficult to get down here and do what had to be done. One day I said to Pat, his wife, that it was no fun running walks with no one turning up, and they said "if you can make it work, you can have it." And I *knew* I could make it work.

So what did it need?

It was about either putting some money into it, which we didn't have. Or some time. Although I already had two jobs, I'm an aggressive American and I was going to find time, and I did. I was a television journalist and that meant funny hours. I worked a seven-day fortnight with eleven hour shifts. And often I did the overnight shift which freed up my days. At that time I was also teaching at an American University summer school for six weeks every summer. So London Walks was kind of my third job. When I think back I wonder how I ever managed to do all that. But I was young and had lots of get up and go.

How did you turn it around?

I can remember looking at a competitor's brochure. It was really slick and I thought "how can we compete with this?" But we had this fantastic guide called June Street, and she just chirped 'we've got much better guides. Sell the guides". That's where we got the idea in our leaflet of giving little capsule bios of the guides and she was right. We tell people a bit about them and which walks they do. I hope it's not being immodest if I say "at least it's fun to read. It makes me want to go on them".

That first summer after we took it over was so tough. We bumped it up to about nine walks a week but still no one was coming along. We looked at getting our brochure in display cases through distribution services but it was way too expensive. Marketing wasn't something I was at all interested in but I hit on the idea of getting a couple of guidebooks and they all had a section which recommended London hotels. Like now, there were about 1200 hotels overall, but just about forty that were listed in the guidebooks. So we took our last hundred pounds... well I'm exaggerating slightly... but it *was* a lot of money for us, and we bought a hundred plastic leaflet dispensers and I

took them round to some of the hotels that were in these books. And the point about a brochure display case is that it has 110 different leaflets but if I could persuade the hoteliers to place our little dispenser then there would be just our one in it. And from then on we'd bring out a new edition several times a year and add another four or five walks each time, so it just went up, up, up, up... and then it got to the point where we could afford to be in brochure display cases. We went against the grain and kept our leaflets white when everyone else was doing colours. That worked well for us because in amongst a group of other brochures, ours stood out. And then of course there was the lovely name 'London Walks'.

And I did other things too. You know I had my three jobs but this was the one I liked the most. I was desperate to keep London Walks going. I hit on the idea of going down to the half-price theatre booth in Leicester Square and leafletting the queue. I thought they were likely to be the sort of people that would go on London walking tours. So in my lunchbreak from TV news I'd zoom down there on my bike. And I made a very interesting discovery. I would normally go down the right hand side of the queue handing out leaflets and then for some reason one day I couldn't go along that side so I had to go down the other one. About three times as many leaflets were accepted. I still puzzle over why that was.

So, I was a guide for ten years before Mary and I took over London Walks in 1990. And I'm still a guide. I can do 57 different walks.

How has your guiding style changed over all that time?

Now I've done so many that I know what works and what doesn't. I started with the Dickens walks and then I just started adding other ones. But the one I remember the most because I had sort of a bad time with it, was the Legal London walk in the Inns of Court. I was doing it for the first time and suddenly started having an anxiety attack. I felt as if I didn't know it as well as I should. Guides say you need to do a walk three times before you start to own it. Well, anyway I got what Americans call 'cotton mouth'. It was really dry in my mouth and it was hard to say the words. For about 90% of the walk I was in a kind of blind panic. Then at the end I was chatting with one of the walkers and I told them I was really nervous and asked if he'd noticed. And he said "no".

Then a few years later I went through a period of having stage fright. I would hyperventilate and because I was hyperventilating I started to think I was going to topple over. And once your mind goes there then it just gets worse. It was getting really bad and I was thinking I was going to have to give up but another guide, Shaughan, saved the day for me. He said "that's easy, just get a walking stick David". I said "I'm only 52, I don't need a walking stick" and he said "just think of it as a stage prop". And that was just completely liberating and now I've got a collection of them.



Some of your guides must have unusual specialist interests?

Well yeah, quite a few of them do. Some of them are highly-regarded experts. Fiona does the beachcomber walk along the Thames at low tide. It's extraordinary, you can pick up anything from the riverbed and she'll identify it. She's an intertidal archaeologist, probably the leading expert on that stretch of the Thames. Then there's Ann Jones, the delightful Ann Jones, who does foody walks. She has four of them now and she digs out such interesting tidbits about food. And I do Strand on the Green. It's just upstream from Chiswick and it only runs once or twice a year. It's described as London's last remaining true village. You get there by walking through an underpass and then up a set of steps over a railway line. So it's really cut off, and the river looks completely different from there. I love it.



Does London Walks have a most popular walk?

Yes, no question, it's the Jack the Ripper walk. It's a bit like being an old fashioned publisher who has one bestseller and that one best seller subsidises the other more academic and worthy titles that don't pay their way. Some of our competitors are bigger than us and make more money by narrowing down their walks to the ones that are real money spinners. But we've thought about this carefully. We're very proud of London Walks and don't want to make loads of money. We want to be the best. I've always wanted London Walks to reflect the joy and plurality of the place. London is just so interesting and we have nearly 500 different walks. It's a labour of love.

Some of our walks have 50-60 walkers but a lot are in single figures. When I first started guiding all those years ago, I set up a three-stage process in my mind. If I got a really good sized group then it was "Wow, I've made the housekeeping money in two hours in this wonderful job". If it wasn't a very good turnout then it would be pocket money, and if it was a really lousy turnout then it would be pin money. As soon as I'd set up those categories in my mind then it didn't matter how many people turned up. The other day the weather was really threatening and just one person turned up for the Kensington walk. She was an Israeli lawyer and she kept her end of bargain and so did I. It was a different experience – she probably got a better walk because we chatted and I was able to take her into places along the way and talk to people. I don't cover my costs with one walker, but so what?

And do you have a favourite walk?

Yes, Hampstead. The one you came on recently. It's just so beautiful.



When you were growing up in Wisconsin, what did you think you might do?

I wanted to be a big baseball player. Something in sports. But I guess I didn't think about it much. My people were farmers. I almost took it a day at a time. The first break out was going to the University of Wisconsin. That widened my view. There were fifty times more people than where I'd grown up. But I wanted to do a PhD at a more prestigious place. I knew I wouldn't get into Harvard or Yale but I thought I might be able to talk myself into Oxford or Cambridge. I didn't manage it but I got into UCL and boy was I lucky. My real education was London. I go on my knees every night and thank the Lord that I got to live in this city.

When you travel abroad do you go on walking tours?

Boy, do we ever! Yes we really do. We go to a lot of trouble with this. Mary, my wife, is one of life's great organisers and she digs and digs. Sometimes we'll hire a guide privately. Say we go to Córdoba for three or four days...well we're probably never going to go back so we want a really good guide.

What's the best thing about your work?

I like almost everything about it. It's very varied, and I get to do what I want for the most part. And I'm just so interested in London.

And what's the worst thing?

You know I'm not overjoyed about social media. There are certain things that I hate. Trip Advisor for example. One concern that started only two years ago has 8,500 5-star reviews. We started fifteen years ago and we have 900 with an average of 4.5, so it's obvious what's going on there. When I first woke up to it a few years ago I looked at Westminster Abbey and the Tower of London and they had 4.5, too. That's better than 5 because it means you're not trying to beat the system. It's a different world from when there were fact checkers and serious reviewers. But that's just the world we live in.

Thank you David, and lastly what are your favourite spots in London?

One is the rise on Hampstead Heath just above the Vale of Health where you can see all over the city. Another is the riverbed of the Thames which is exposed at low tide. That's where I'd like my

ashes to go. And a third spot is Strand on the Green. But then everything about London is interesting. This place is so stimulating, you just never get bored.

