‘ETHEL & ERNEST’S CIRCUIT OF SOUTHFIELDS’

(4.5 miles, 50-60 minutes) Start at WIMBLEDON PARK UNDERGROUND STATION.
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Thanks to these downloadable maps you can select your own short local history walk taking in significant features of interest in the Tooting/Earlsfield/Wandsworth, Wimbledon area. Summerstown182 'Great Escapes' are just the job for your daily exercise allowance! Even at a slow pace you can do each one in less than an hour. Ten flavours to choose from, every one a winner! Perfect for mind, body and spirit.

With no Wimbledon this year, this walk is a very good reason to go to Southfields and see what goes on in the fascinating area just a short stroll from the world famous tennis lawns. Its packed with interest and acting as your guides are Ethel and Ernest, the parents of Raymond Briggs, immortalised in his 1999 book and 2016 animated film. In 1930, 65 Ashen Grove was where they came to live and they would have been very familiar with a lot of the places we are going to visit.

1 START WIMBLEDON PARK UNDERGROUND STATION - The District Line came here on 3rd June 1889 turning this area upside down. Much of the development of Southfields dates from then. Before that, it was mainly open fields, a bit of market gardening, but very few inhabitants. Over the next twenty years much of the surrounding area was covered with houses. Start your tour by crossing Arthur Road and bearing left into Home Park Road, heading for Wimbledon Park.

2 Enter the park and take a moment to enjoy the magnificent view from the pavilion. This would have been a ten minute walk from Ashen Grove for young Raymond and his parents. In the film there are a number of scenes of them coming here when he was growing up. Wimbledon Park was home to the Spencer family who owned vast swathes of property in this area. During the 1760s, the park was landscaped by Capability Brown, including the enlargement of an existing lake.

3 Cross the park, passing to the left of the tennis courts. You could divert further left to enjoy the lake or the Waterfall Garden, but the aim is to head for the Revestoke Road entrance beneath the railway line on the far right hand side boundary. Either way, enjoy the green space as there are a lot of streets coming up. On the left hand side behind the trees is the athletics track, home of the Hercules Club. Next to this is the grass is a mass of tents during Wimbledon Fortnight as people camp overnight to join the early morning queue for tickets. The Championships only came to their present location in 1922 and Fred Perry won the first of his three men’s singles titles in 1934, the year Raymond Briggs was born.

4 Enter Revestoke Road and turn first left at McCluskeyes shop into Elenham Road. You are working your way through the famous Southfields Grid - but don’t expect to see any pubs. Landowner John Augustus Beaumont bought the estate when the Spencers ran out of money. His daughter Augusta who inherited when he died in 1893 was a member of the temperance movement and drew up a restrictive covenant when she sold the land for development. The last of the 1,766 houses, maisonettes and shops here was built in 1908. Two pubs were eventually added, but not till the 1990s.

5 Go left into Replingham Road. You are now in central Southfields with the underground station in front of you. For two weeks of the year Wimbledon Park Road to your left is thronged with tennis fans heading towards the courts. Follow it instead to the right and past the site of the old Lyceum cinema and ‘Everyday’ Church with its interesting selection of tablets set into the wall.

6 A possible diversion a little further down on your right is Standon Road, home to the beautiful art nouveau style ‘Flourish and Nourish’ Frame Foods baby food factory, dating from 1904. It now houses luxury apartments and is called ‘Tiffiny Heights’.

7 Take a left into Pulborough Road. Continue straight over Granville Road into Gressenhall Road and look out on your left for the distinctive dome of London’s first mosque. This would have been a ten minute walk from Ashen Grove for young Raymond and his parents. In the film there are a number of scenes of them coming here when he was growing up. Wimbledon Park was home to the Spencer family who owned vast swathes of property in this area. During the 1760s, the park was landscaped by Capability Brown, including the enlargement of an existing lake.

8 Turn right into Melrose Avenue. The second road on the left is Stroud Road. This was formerly Marlborough Road and a short distance down here, No14 on the right hand side was home to Pete Hampton and Laura Bowman, two American rag-time artists and musicians. They lived here from 1907-1909 along with Laura’s parents and a Russian servant, naming the house ‘Darktown Villa’, in honour of their group ‘The Darktown Entertainers’. Pete and Laura were part of a wave of African-American musicians and performers who due to racism couldn’t work in their own country but came to Europe in the Edwardian age. They were mentors to the young Sadie Crawford, the tooting jazz pioneer.

9 Return to the park and follow the path across it, past the Leisure Centre into Burr Road. Go left and follow the road round the corner past Southfields Academy. At Merton Road, before continuing to your left, look back on your right to see the handsome cream-tiled ‘OK Sauce Factory’, built in 1928. The Gardeners Arms and Earl Spencer pubs across the road from here give some clues to the local history.

10 Continue along the path to Wandle Trail. Cross Kimber Road passing the skateboard park on your right. Follow Foster’s Way alongside the river until you come to a footbridge. Turn left across this and enter Lydden Road. Once a busy residential street, this was an area rich in gypsy and traveller heritage. Ernest Redvers Briggs was born here in 1900. The houses are all gone, replaced now by light industrial units and the remains of factories from an earlier age such as Airfix on your immediate right. There is no trace of the road, full of hoses and cosmetrongers carts that young Ernest the milkman stepped out of in a scene in the film. The 1911 census lists a family of six children living at No8 with Ernest’s father James working in the ‘photographic factory’ almost certainly Columbia Records in neighbouring Bendon Valley. One of his brothers worked as ‘a fat melter at the bone works’, probably in the nearby horse-slaughtering yard. Another was ‘a smith’s mate at the ironworks’. Ernest’s mother Rosa died in 1906 aged 39 and his father remarried the following year. Ethel was from Lewisham and the film shows how Ernest was embarrassed to take her to visit his humble roots. Their move a mile or so across the Wandle to Southfields was truly like stepping into a different world.

11 Go left and follow the path past the Leisure Centre into Burr Road. Go left and follow the road round the corner past Southfields Academy. At Merton Road, before continuing to your left, look back on your right to see the handsome cream-tiled ‘OK Sauce Factory’, built in 1928. The Gardeners Arms and Earl Spencer pubs across the road from here give some clues to the local history.

12 Continue the walk, passing through the park. West Hill Road is on your left with the District Line’s Wandle Park entrance beneath the railway line on the far right hand side boundary. Either way, enjoy the green space as there are a lot of streets coming up. On the left hand side behind the trees is the athletics track, home of the Hercules Club. Next to this is the grass is a mass of tents during Wimbledon Fortnight as people camp overnight to join the early morning queue for tickets. The Championships only came to their present location in 1922 and Fred Perry won the first of his three men’s singles titles in 1934, the year Raymond Briggs was born.

13 A little further on, cross over to St Barnabas Church on the corner of Lavenham Road. This was originally a ‘tin tabernacle’ whilst the houses in the Grid were being built up. It was eventually consecrated in 1908 with room for a congregation of 800. Go down Lavenham Road, then first left into Ashen Grove. A high explosive bomb here in the early days of the Blitz destroyed a number of homes.

14 Continue along the road to the right and continue to your left, look back on your right to see the handsome cream-tiled ‘OK Sauce Factory’, built in 1928. The Gardeners Arms and Earl Spencer pubs across the road from here give some clues to the local history.

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16 Turn left into Durnsford Avenue, then right into Ashen Grove. Named after a sweep of trees planted in Wimbledon Park by Capability Brown and subsequently a farm. Just after Wosley Road, No65 is on your right. This Edwardian three-bedroomed terrace house is where Raymond Briggs was born in 1934, the son of a Ernest a milkman and Ethel a maidservant. They bought it for £850 in 1930. Ernest earned about £3 a week as a milkman, supplementing that with a bit of painting and decorating. Raymond went on to art college but didn’t actually leave the family home until 1957. Ernest and Ethel both passed away in 1971.

17 Continue on Ashen Grove and turn left into Melrose Avenue. The second road on the left is Stroud Road. This was formerly Marlborough Road and a short distance down here, No14 on the right hand side was home to Pete Hampton and Laura Bowman, two American rag-time artists and musicians. They lived here from 1907-1909 along with Laura’s parents and a Russian servant, naming the house ‘Darktown Villa’, in honour of their group ‘The Darktown Entertainers’. Pete and Laura were part of a wave of African-American musicians and performers who due to racism couldn’t work in their own country but came to Europe in the Edwardian age. They were mentors to the young Sadie Crawford, the tooting jazz pioneer.

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