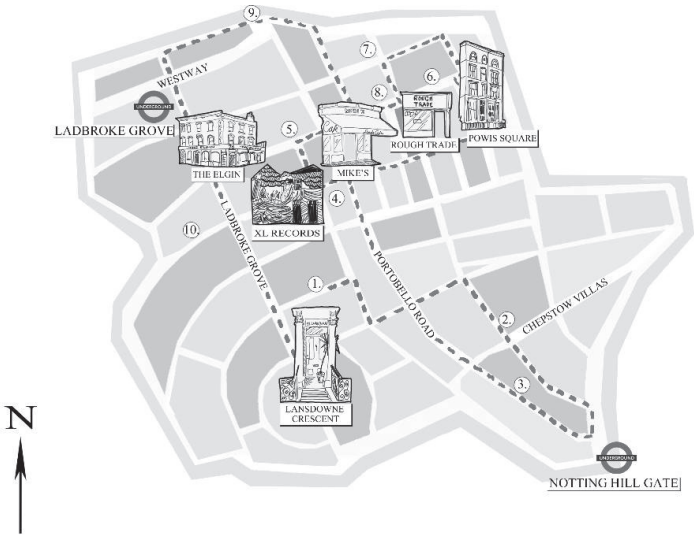


## WALK 3

### – Music, Literature and Film –



1. Joe Meek's home recording studio, 20 Arundel Gardens.
2. Literary House, 24 Chepstow Villas.
3. George Orwell's lodgings, 22 Portobello Road.
4. The Travel Bookshop, 13 Blenheim Crescent.
5. The Blue Door, 280 Westbourne Park Road.
6. All Saints Church.
7. Island Records Studios, 8–10 Basing Street.
8. Scene in *A Hard Day's Night*, 20 All Saints Road.
9. *Oz & Frenz* offices, 307 Portobello Road.
10. Marc Bolan's flat, 57 Blenheim Crescent.

I read about Notting Hill long before I set foot in the neighbourhood, a well-thumbed paperback copy of Colin MacInnes's *Absolute Beginners* tucked into my duffel coat pocket at sixth-form college. Growing up in the rural wilderness of Herefordshire I dreamt about this bohemian enclave of London – I picked up mentions of Portobello Road market in Blur songs, tracked-down deleted Hawkwind and Quintessence albums and squinted through a poor-quality VHS copy of *Performance*, the seminal Nic Roeg and Donald Cammell film starring Mick Jagger. When I eventually moved to the capital it was the place I instantly headed for as I felt like I already knew it. This walk will introduce you to some of the places connected with film, music and literature in the neighbourhood – from recording studios to film locations and underground newspapers. Though it looks spruced up and affluent today, this area really was the countercultural capital of the city for a good portion of the 1960s and 1970s. Music of all genres flowed from these streets: from reggae; rock; punk; psychedelia; progressive-rock; folk and dub. They say if you listen hard enough, like one of London's lost rivers you can still hear these sounds bubbling away beneath the surface of the paving stones.

What better place to start than with the original rock'n'roll maverick, record producer Joe Meek, who had his very first home studio at **20 Arundel Gardens**? Meek is best known as the man behind 'Telstar' – the

number 1 worldwide smash hit released in December 1962 and famously Margaret Thatcher's favourite record. Indeed, the honky-tonk piano used on that record was picked up on the Portobello Road market. Meek rented the ground floor flat in 1957, and had you visited at that time you could have been forgiven for thinking you had stumbled on the lair of a mad scientist in an English B-movie – reel-to-reel tape machines, echo units, microphones and amplifiers filled every inch of the tiny one-bedroom flat, with a labyrinth of cables dangerously criss-crossing the floor. Today it is not uncommon for a musician or producer to have a home-studio, but back in the 1950s it was unheard of. Meek was a trailblazer and this was the first of its kind in the neighbourhood. His tenure at Arundel Gardens was cut short when a record release party for his skiffle-produced tune 'Sizzling Hot' by Jimmy Miller and the Barbecues got a little out of hand with a reported 150 attendees. His long-suffering neighbours decided enough was enough and he received his marching orders soon afterwards.

Whilst rock'n'roll and skiffle dominated the airwaves of the late 1950s, the literary headlines were dominated by the so-called Angry Young Men – a loose-knit group of playwrights and novelists – and Notting Hill was home to some of its principal players. Walk on, up the slightly hilly incline to **24 Chepstow Villas**. Today it may look like just another beautiful Notting Hill house, with its pristine white paint gleaming in

the sunshine – home to the city’s most wealthy residents. But if we wind the clock back to the 1950s, we find a very different house and a very different set of inhabitants. This was a down-at-heel neighbourhood: many of the houses had fallen into ruin with the sash-window frames rotting, the white stucco crumbling, and the gardens an overgrown tangle. If you had visited this house in the 1950s or 1960s it would have likely been for a literary or arty gathering of some kind – for it was home to a revolving cast of writers, painters and actors. Back then the house was divided up into eight high-ceilinged rooms with fireplaces, along with a somewhat damp basement where Dylan Thomas was rumoured to have lived for a spell. During this time the postman would have delivered mail addressed to cult writer and troubled junkie Alexander Trocchi; Scottish painters Colquhoun and MacBryde; Welsh novelist and journalist Bill Hopkins; novelist Cressida Lindsay; painters John Eyles and Roland Jarvis; actor Dudley Sutton and, for a brief moment in 1956 the most famous of the whole lot, Colin Wilson, whose debut book *The Outsider* had made him an overnight sensation. When the follow-up *Religion and the Rebel* was published a year later and received a critical drubbing, he decamped to the solitude of Cornwall, handing on his room to local aspiring author Laura Del-Rivo, who still lives in the area, now in her eighth decade. She has published several novels since then, including her first, *The Furnished Room*, which was turned into



24 Chepstow Villas, formerly a hotbed of bohemian life  
and creativity

a film in 1963 and rechristened *West Eleven*. Starring Diana Dors and directed by Michael Winner, it is well worth tracking down as it was shot on location in and

around Notting Hill and captures the seedy bohemian atmosphere in black and white.

Head back to Portobello Road and walk south to **number 22**, for it was here, in the winter of 1927, that a 24-year-old aspiring writer named Eric Blair, soon to become better known as George Orwell, lodged with a Mrs Craig after resigning his position as Chief Superintendent of The Indian Imperial Police in Burma. It was so cold he was forced to use a candle to warm his hands up before writing. Despite these trying conditions Eric wrote parts of *Down and Out in Paris and London* here and determined that he must become a writer. The rest, as they say, is history. We can safely assume that conditions inside number 22 have improved since then – the last time the property went on the market in 2014 it sold for £2.5 million.

Turn and walk on north down Portobello Road and you will begin to see the antique shops that dominate this part of the street. It was here that *Otley*, the 1968 Dick Clement directed film, was set and shot. A Swinging London spy caper, it failed to do well at the box office, but it is worth the price of admission for its opening sequence. It shows lead actor Tom Courtenay striding down this stretch of Portobello Road on a bright, sunny day. The street looks remarkably similar as Courtenay, playing the central character of Otley, a hapless, down-on-his-luck antiques dealer, waves a friendly greeting to the shopkeepers and stallholders. It would take a far more famous film, shot

some thirty years later, that also uses Portobello market as its backdrop, to make the street internationally famous. *Notting Hill*, starring Hugh Grant and Julia Roberts, remains *the* calling card for the neighbourhood with fans coming from all over the world to track down the ‘shop from the movie’ and have their photo taken outside the fabled Blue Door. If you continue to walk down Portobello and turn left on to **Blenheim Crescent** you will find **The Notting Hill Bookshop at number 13** – this is the site of the former Travel Bookshop, the independent bookshop that director Richard Curtis used as the inspiration for the fictional Travel Book Company in the film. I worked at this shop for a number of years until rent and rates rises, along with online competition from Amazon made it untenable – thankfully it remains a bookshop and still has the same interior and shop fittings so you can step inside and have your own Hugh or Julia moment.

The Blue Door is one street further north at **280 Westbourne Park Road**. This front door is by far the most iconic and famous in the neighbourhood (perhaps even London) for it was here that William Thacker the bumbling bookseller played by Hugh Grant lived, and it is the location for the famous scene where Rhys Ifans, playing Thacker’s housemate Spike, poses in his fetching grey Y-fronts for the world’s media. The house was chosen as the location because it was, at the time of the film’s production, Richard Curtis’s home. The original Blue Door was sold off for charity, but the current

residents have kept the door blue, so it makes for the ideal photo opportunity. Double back to **Mike's Café at number 12 Blenheim Crescent** for a coffee or a bite to eat before the next section of our walk. Mike's has been serving hearty fry-ups since 1962 and was featured on the cover of Traffic's 1971 album *Welcome to the Canteen*. Still a popular haunt for locals and tourists alike, Mike's holds out against the rising tide of gentrification. Here you are just as likely to see a market stall trader as a hedge fund manager.

Walk on, crossing Portobello Road, heading west from the junction with Blenheim Crescent, and you will find legendary independent record shop **Rough Trade Records at 130 Talbot Road**. Rough Trade was founded in 1976 and originally opened around the corner at 202 Kensington Park Road. It could not have timed its arrival at a more perfect cultural moment – 1976 was the year that punk broke and Rough Trade soon became a key outpost in the punk revolution. It acted as a community hub where gig posters could be Xeroxed, fanzines cut up and glued together, posters could be displayed and flyers could be handed out. Most importantly it offered a space for like-minded music freaks to meet and bond. Founded by a young corkscrew-curved Cambridge graduate named Geoff Travis, the shop soon evolved, spawning a distribution network and record label of the same name. Travis became more interested in the label side of things, and the staff bought the shop from him and moved