



CHILDREN'S NEWSLETTER

BY CHRISTINE TEMIN

Here we are with a 22 Jermyn Street Children's Newsletter brought about by the hotel's commitment to accommodating people under five feet tall. We will discuss matters including attitude (many Brits would rather take their dogs on holiday than their kids), restaurants that don't merely tolerate children but are happy to welcome them, a museum where they can try on replicas of centuries-old armor, and why, before you depart for London, you might want to rent DVDs of Sherlock Holmes movies as well as the Public Broadcasting Series on Henry VIII and his six wives (divorced, beheaded, died, divorced, beheaded, survived: I'm all for number six) along with the film "My Fair Lady", set in Covent Garden, to prepare them for a delightful visit to England that may also be educational. However, as the mother of two sons with dozens of London experiences starting when the younger was three years old, I wouldn't stress the "educational" aspect, which might put them off.

In this edition of the Newsletter, we'll offer opinions on theater, shops and restaurants that may appeal to children, a glossary of the British version of English as opposed to the American one (the elevator in England is the lift, etc.) as well as suggesting itineraries for day trips in London with attractions that are close together, to cut down on travel time. While we're on the subject of travel, my older son once memorized the entire London underground (read subway) system, a totally useless exercise but one that made him happy. He kept a poster of the tube (read subway again) on his bedroom wall until he left for college. This is another way of saying don't try too hard to predict what aspects of London will appeal to your children. Or not appeal to them. My younger son, who grew up on the violence of American TV, was so terrified by the London Dungeon, with its ghoulish exhibits on the Great Plague and Jack the Ripper among other nasty subjects, which we had to leave ASAP. And the Dungeon is *supposed* to be for kids. The same thing happened with the long-running West End show "The Woman in Black," who does a lot of high decibel screaming.

My family's love of and loyalty to 22 began when the luggage of Nathaniel, no. 2 son, then 8 years old, was lost in a simple (you'd think) flight from Brussels to Heathrow. Nate was morose about the whole thing, even though the American stores that carried his entire wardrobe were right around the corner on Regent Street. Maybe he was in shock, remembering the time when he was three and I bought him a kilt on Bond Street. Even a three year old American boy knows that guys don't wear skirts.

Anyhow, the lost luggage arrived four hours later, but meanwhile, there appeared a 22 Jermyn Street bathrobe *in a child size*, something I'd never encountered before, in all the hotels I've visited, world-wide, with my children. Nate cheered up.

There are a few places in London that are still snooty about children. When my sons were nine and 14 (they've since grown up) they were parked behind a large potted palm in a very famous old hotel because they weren't wearing jackets and ties *for breakfast*. They were garbed in what the Brits call "smart casual," which means collared shirts, real pants and shoes, not jeans and sneakers, but for this particular establishment that wasn't – and still isn't – enough. For girls, the dress code is simpler. Most girls love dressing up, so bring their favorite attire, don't let them wear sneakers in fancy restaurants, and you'll be all set.

Most restaurants in London have changed their attitude in the last decade or so. "Smart casual" will get children in almost anywhere, and there are more nice restaurants happy to take child customers, so don't settle for the Pizza Hut and McDonald's that you could eat at home. Exposing them to good places is civilizing.

On a recent trip to London, I had lunch at the café at the world's most famous (and occasionally infamous) auction house, Sotheby's, on Bond Street. I asked the maitre d' if he'd take nicely dressed ("smart casual" again) and well-behaved children. He said "of course". Some of our regular clients are not well-behaved." The "regulars" are possibly there to bid on multi-million dollar paintings. Before or after lunch you should take your children into the galleries where those paintings are hanging. It's quite a different experience than taking them to a museum, because everything at Sotheby's has an estimated price tag that will make children aware of the buying and selling aspect of art. Perhaps they'll become collectors. At any rate, they'll get an inkling of the international art market when the waiter at the café asks "In what currency do you want to pay?"

At Sotheby's, and at most of the eating places we're about to recommend, it is important and essential that you make reservations (or bookings, in Brit-speak.) You'll be better off getting a 22 concierge doing this for you than if you try on your own. You'll get a nicer table. I once tried with no success to book a table at a good Notting Hill restaurant. "No room," I was told. The friend I was staying with, who

had a perfect Oxbridge accent, called right back and the table was ours. Britain is still a class-based society.

A couple of business-like details: the dollar is not faring well against the British pound at the moment, so London can be expensive. On the other hand, in the last few years almost all of London's museums have dropped admission charges. Historic churches including St. Paul's Cathedral and Westminster Abbey have done the opposite, charging steep fees unless you're willing to go during services and pose as worshippers, which would be tacky. For many attractions there are family rates, typically for two adults and two or three children, which will make you happy to have brought your kids to London in the way that you're happy that they qualify as deductions at income tax time. Note that most of London's attractions take credit cards, but there are a few exceptions, including some small museums. This is your chance to let your kids experience foreign currency transactions. Doing the math is a good mental exercise (as they used to tell you about learning Latin) and probably more useful than memorizing the entire tube map.

There aren't a lot of books that specialize in visiting London with children. The best I've found is "*take the kids LONDON*" published by Cadogan Guides. Beware, though: guides tend to linger in bookshops after information they contain has become outdated. The Internet has more up-to-date facts on opening hours, admission fees, etc. "*take the kids*" does, however, have out-of-the-box suggestions, including one about pointing out the goofy names of pubs: Lamb and Flag, Elephant and Castle, Hoop and Grapes and so on. London's oldest pubs were founded at a time when most of the populace couldn't read, and had to rely on painted signs to identify their destinations, so Lamb and Flag really does have a sign with a picture of a lamb and a flag.

The child-oriented website www.guyfox.co.uk is another good resource. The organization, dedicated to teaching children about London's long history, was named after Guy Fawkes, the leader of the Roman Catholic contingent, who planned the 1605 "Gunpowder Plot" to blow up Westminster Palace. (This strikes me as the equivalent of having an American kids' website named after Benedict Arnold.) Guy Fox's publications include brightly-hued maps of areas of London using drawings by schoolchildren and pointing out the neighborhood's attractions, as well as a poster featuring all the kings and queens of England. The website will take you step by step through the process of obtaining them. (Your kids, who have grown up with the Web, could probably do this more easily than you, but you'd have to give them your credit card to pay, and if they're clever enough they might just memorize all 16 digits plus expiration date for their future use.)

You can explore London on foot, in a double-decker tourist bus, by boat, and, in London Ducktours, on amphibious vehicles first used for ship to shore transport during World War II. My preferred experience is with a company called London Walks, which offers expert (and funny) guides taking you through Haunted London or little-known neighborhoods such as Little Venice. There's The Real World of Harry Potter tour and one devoted to Sherlock Holmes, broad overviews and specialized walks. You meet your guide at a designated tube stop. You don't have to pre-register. If the weather is awful, you don't have to go. (The

guides do, however: the tours take place rain or shine). Brochures are available at some museums and hotels. The website is www.walks.com.

You can Google virtually anything listed below to find specific info on opening hours, admission fees, addresses, directions, etc. This is a highly selective list: London has hundreds of attractions that I've left out. Those included are merely my family's favorites. Your family may have others, and if they do, let the concierges at 22 know about them!

RESTAURANTS

Some general points: London's museum restaurants are terrific places for families, especially since the massive improvements in most of them over the last decade or two. They used to be dismal. Now most of them have lovely cafes and restaurants that will make both children and adults happy. I'll mention the best of the lot in the "Itineraries" section of the newsletter.

As a rule, ethnic restaurants – Italian, Indian, Japanese, Chinese – are more hospitable to families than British ones, which often have a sense of, shall we say, reserve about them.

A favorite of mine, inexpensive and close to the museums of Trafalgar Square, is St. Martin's Spice, where the manager looked as startled when I asked if they welcomed children as he would had I asked if they served food. "Of course," was the answer. The same goes for Furama, a Chinese restaurant right off Shaftsbury Avenue, in the thick of theatreland and Chinatown. The good thing about London's expanding restaurant scene is that there are now pre- and post-theater dinners in dozens, if not hundreds, of restaurants. When I was growing up, you could either eat or see a play.

Jermyn Street is restaurant heaven. For a very casual but wholesome snack or meal, try the Caffe Nero that is tucked inside St. James's Church, a progressive institution with free midday concerts and a courtyard market with antiques and crafts from around the world. At the end of Jermyn Street is Franco's Restaurant, which serves scrumptious Italian food. The maitre d' assured me they were very child friendly. Al Duca, also just a few minutes' walk from 22, is another delightful Italian restaurant with no pretentiousness, a relaxed place serving a contemporary Italian menu. Also very close to 22 is Noura, one of several Lebanese restaurants under the same management in London. The décor is straight out of the Arabian nights - silks, velvets, tassels - and the *mezze* – small amounts of several dishes, both hot and cold, will appeal to children.

If your children like fish, you can splurge by taking them to Bentley's Oyster Bar and Grill, also very near 22. Bentley's has been in the same location since 1916 and has two restaurants in the same building. The ground floor one is more relaxed; upstairs, more formal. Almost next door is Fishworks, restaurant and fish shop in one which should delight the children.

The choices within easy walking distance of 22 are nearly endless. Consult the Restaurant Guide written by 22's owner Henry Togna, and ask the hotel's concierge for suggestions, to book a table for you, that you need even in museum restaurants, and to give you directions on getting there.

AFTERNOON TEA

This iconic British ritual is well worth having your children experience. You can get it at various famous shops, Harrods and Fortnum & Mason among them. The most elaborate teas, however, are at the big hotels. My sons' favorites were those at Brown's Hotel and The Ritz. The menu typically will consist of several courses: delicate little crestless sandwiches; scones, perhaps with clotted cream; pastries, cakes and, of course, a selection of teas. The prices are absurd: £35 per person at Brown's and £37 at The Ritz. You can rationalize the cost by treating it as a pre-theatre dinner, which it's filling enough to be. The dress code for Brown's is smart casual for everyone. At the Ritz it's starchier: smart casual for women, girls and boys under 12. Any male over twelve has to wear jacket and tie. The woman at The Ritz to whom I posed this question on attire is probably still being resuscitated.

SHOPPING

If this is your children's first visit to London, you've got to take them to the most famous British emporia. These would include Lillywhite's, the mammoth establishment that is possibly the best and most comprehensive sporting goods stores in the world. Here's the place to expose your children to the equipment for rugby, cricket, and other sports that may be unfamiliar to them. Hamleys is London's best-known toy store, while Harrods is the city's most famous department store. The sumptuousness of the Harrods food halls, which stock just about anything anyone on the planet has ever eaten, is about as far as you can get from an American supermarket. Ditto for Fortnum & Mason, a 300 year old enterprise patronized by the royal family. The displays of food for sale here are themselves works of art. Fortnum's is just down the street from 22.

Some of the shops around 22 Jermyn Street, an area known as St. James's, suggest that you're still in the 19th century. On the ground floor of 22 is Bates, a legendary hatter for men, with plaids, leathers and feathers adorning time-honored designs. Next door is "George F. Trumper, Gentleman's Hairdresser," founded in 1875. In the window is a gorgeous arrangement of brushes of badger hair, luxurious shaving kits, and Bay Rum cologne. It's a male paradise to the point where I felt slightly awkward walking in. In America we have loads of unisex hair cutters, but at Trumper's it's a guys-only thing. I was allowed to go downstairs (only because there weren't any clients around) and see where they do the cutting, in capacious leather chairs with stacks of fluffy towels nearby. One employee (think Jeeves) told me "We have clients whose grandfathers came here, and as soon as boys are old enough to *have* hair, they can get it cut here." So a good bonding experience might be for a father and son to have their haircuts together.

Winston Churchill said "A gentleman only buys his cheese from Paxton & Whitfield", which is also on Jermyn Street. On warm days when the door is ajar you smell the shop before you see it. This particular cheese monger has been around since 1797, and while the cheeses aren't quite that old, they're beautifully aged.

London's museum shops are great places to buy things. Virtually all of them carry guides, activity books, artistic toys and models and other enticements for young visitors, mostly related to the Institutions' collections.

You'll want to explore more off-the-beaten track shops as well, of course. If your children like sports, take them to one of the branches of Soccer Scene for jerseys with the names of their favorite players.

The Shaftesbury Avenue area is also rich in little shops that will interest children. At Angels Fancy Dress they can choose their next Halloween costumes from a selection of pirate suits, skeleton attire, costumes with sequined wings and ghoulish masks. There are some exquisite grown-up masks as well, beautifully crafted and fit for a Venetian carnival.

Forbidden Planet has an array of grisly toys, books on toys and action figures, along with The Lord of the Rings Chess Collection, books on the occult including "A Field Guide to Dragons," a huge selection of comic books, and a selection of goofy greeting cards. My favorite pictures a happy housewife who says "Every day I give my family two choices for dinner...take it or leave it". Orbital Comics is a basement space specializing in vintage and back issues.

Should there be a youngster in your family interested in ballet (see "Billy Elliot" below) Freed's is a mandatory stop. It's the world's most famous supplier of everything a ballet-fixated child could want. How about a tutu for your budding ballerina?

Tucked away on the South Bank is the don't-miss Gabriel's Wharf, a cluster of small craft shops that look like they've been around for centuries. The makers there double as the sales staff. You and your kids can watch them throwing pots or spinning yarn or making delicate jewelry, and then have the opportunity to buy some of it at quite reasonable prices. Highest recommendations to Vivienne Legg Ceramics: Legg makes delicate hand painted pottery; jewelers Davies and Vaughan; and clothiers Funki Fresh, whose name says it all. There are numerous casual restaurants in this charming enclave, which is built around a pleasant square where you can eat outside in warm weather.

I'd also recommend London's shopping arcades, which are elegant relics of the 19th century - short, covered streets that house small specialist shops selling everything from cashmere to die-cast toy soldiers. Three that are close to 22 are the Princes, Piccadilly and Burlington Arcades.

Charing Cross Road and the little streets leading off it are *the* places for book buying. While London has huge bookshops - the list led by the legendary Foyle's - it's probably more interesting to take children brought up on Borders and Barnes & Noble to the shops on the small streets, which specialize in areas including maps, rare first editions, and, yes, children's books, in the case of Nigel Williams Rare Books on Cecil Court. Here's where you take your offspring to learn what a first edition of "Peter Pan" costs.

When you're in the Covent Garden area, skip Disney and head for Benjamin Pollock's Toy Shop. It's a don't-miss, a family-run independent store since 1880, stocking such traditional toys as puppets, kaleidoscopes and, a specialty appropriate to its Covent Garden setting, toy theatres.

The Astrology Shop in the Covent Garden area will prepare your personal horoscope in five minutes and also sell you

lunar calendars and astrological greeting cards, puzzles, and crystal balls. Neal St., where it's located, is a particularly pleasant pedestrian street filled with little boutiques.

ITINERARIES

Buckingham Palace, Big Ben, Westminster Abbey

If your kids have heard of one ceremony that summarizes the pageantry of England, it's probably the Changing of the Guard in front of Buckingham Palace, about a fifteen minute walk from 22. It takes place generally at 11: 30 am. However, it happens only every other day in winter, does not take place when it's really rainy, and is usually a mob scene. These guys are actual soldiers who can no doubt participate in combat when it's raining, but they don't want to do the performance if you, the tourists, aren't in attendance.

If the weather's ok, get there early to claim a place near the metal railings and bring your camera. The ceremony lasts about 45 minutes and is impressive indeed if your children haven't seen that level of spectacle at home. A Girl Scout parade this is not. It's up to you whether to mention to your kids that the guards don't always do a perfect job of protecting Her Majesty: some years ago a nutcase successfully climbed over the fence and found his way to the Queen's bedroom for a chat.

You can tell if the monarch is in residence by whether the Royal Standard, as opposed to the Union Jack (the British flag) is flying at full mast. Her Majesty doesn't reside at "Buck House" all the time. The palace is a 19th century creation of a previous queen, Victoria, and, what with the crowds, it isn't as peaceful as Windsor Castle, said to be the Queen's favorite residence. (A disclaimer: I get some of my juicier info on the royals from "Majesty" magazine, to which a number of Americans, including me, are addicted. I don't care if it's accurate; I just want to read about these folks.)

In August and September, when the Queen is in Balmoral, her home in Scotland, a small part of Buckingham Palace is open to the public for 45 minute tours that are, in my view, not worth the hefty admission fee, about \$25, when I went.

Big Ben is the world's most famous clock, and hence worth walking by. It is spectacularly lit at night, when the four clock faces, each 23 feet square, shine over the city. The minute hands are 14 feet long. The name comes not from anything about the clock itself, but, supposedly, from Sir Benjamin Hall, the commissioner of works when the clock first chimed. During World War II, a bomb destroyed the Commons Chamber of Parliament but the clock kept chiming, broadcast by the BBC as a message of hope.

Westminster Abbey: for over a thousand years God – at least the Roman Catholic or Anglican version - has been worshipped in a church on this site. Legend has it that the Abbey was founded in the seventh century, but its first documentation is in the 10th. By the 13th century, most of what we see today – a great stone church in a style that is based on the French Gothic – was in place. But it wasn't until 1745 that the two west towers went up, essentially finishing the church. In the Middle Ages "Abbey" meant "monastery," but in the 16th century, after Henry VIII's dissolution of the monasteries, Westminster Abbey's official title changed to The Collegiate Church of St. Peter at

Westminster. Good luck asking for directions using that name.

It's always a good idea to teach children the terminology of various fields while they're on site. Westminster Abbey is a great opportunity for them to learn architectural terms such as "flying buttress" and "fan vaulting" while they're looking at excellent examples such as those at the Abbey, as opposed to while they're reading about them back home.

Exquisite architecture aside, Westminster Abbey is best known as the final resting place of as many as 3000 people. At first, you had to be royal or in the upper echelons of the aristocracy to be buried or entombed there. Among the most illustrious examples are, Queen Elizabeth I, her half-sister Queen Mary I, and Margaret Douglas, Countess of Lennox, whose eldest son, Lord Darnley, married Mary Queen of Scots. Their son, James VI of Scotland, became James I of England. James commissioned tombs in the Abbey for both Elizabeth and his mother: His mother gets the more flamboyant one.

In the Abbey are chapels with tombs dedicated to many generations of the same family. In the Northumberland Vault, for instance, are family members from 1745 to 1988. There appeared to me to be room for one more person's name to be inscribed on the tablet. So what happens with the next ten dead family members?

In the Chapel of St. John the Baptist is a huge table-like structure on which lie two effigies, a man and wife. There is clearly room for another effigy, but wife number two, who was intended by her husband for this space, outlived him and didn't want to share him for all eternity with wife number one. Along with all its other virtues, the Abbey is something of a soap opera.

However opulent the tombs of the royals, they're upstaged by Poets' Corner. Geoffrey Chaucer, he of "Canterbury Tales," was interred in the Abbey in 1400 – because he had served the royal family, not because he was a great writer. In the 16th century his other accomplishments began to be apparent, and his remains were upgraded to what has become known as Poets' Corner. Writers actually buried there include Samuel Johnson, Charles Dickens and Thomas Hardy. Writers only memorialized there include William Blake, Jane Austen, and T.S. Eliot.

Because of its age and London's pollution, the exterior of the Abbey is splotchy, especially when compared to its freshly scrubbed and much younger neighbor, St. Margaret's Church, a fashionable venue for society weddings. The state of the Abbey's exterior is a good way to introduce children to the necessity of keeping historic buildings in good shape.

For lunch in the area, try Quirinale, a light and airy Italian restaurant with an imaginative chef.

Covent Garden

Centered by the famous market that's now filled with more cafes and exotic clothing boutiques than with purveyors of fruit and flowers, Covent Garden started out as "Convent Garden." The convent left with the 16th century dissolution of the monasteries, and eventually the "n" was dropped. Not a bit convent-like any more, the area is bustling with street performers from classical musicians to "statues" that are really spray-painted actors. It's a great place to hang out.

The recently renovated and expanded London Transport Museum in Covent Garden traces the development of the capital's transportation from the days when much of it was done on the River Thames to the era of horse-drawn carriages and then the world's first underground railway. There are great family programs and lots of hands-on activities.

The star attraction of Covent Garden, though, is the Royal Opera House, which towers over the neighborhood. Britain's finest opera and ballet companies perform in a setting of red velvet and gilded wood. But the Opera House is much more than its main stage. It is a world in itself, alive all day long as well as for nighttime performances. At the entrance you'll find plentiful information about the activities that keep the place abuzz: tea dances, free lunchtime concerts, art exhibitions, backstage tours, experimental choreography and music created by up-and-coming talents, and special performances for children, including the one-act opera "Gentle Giant" or the ballet "Tales of Beatrix Potter." There's even a Family Trail through the Opera House: Pick up the map at the entrance. Many of the events take place in the small "black box" Linbury Theatre, while others are in the soaring Floral Hall, an iron and glass Victorian structure that the Opera House took over and restored in 1999. Dining options within the complex are open even when there's not a performance going on. On performance days you can arrange to eat your first course prior to the show and subsequent courses in the intervals.

The entire Covent Garden area is rife with restaurants. One that I enjoyed is Tuttons Brasserie, which has half-price meals for children and a sophisticated menu for grown-ups.

The Tower of London

This visit is going to take a half day and, alas, the Tower isn't in a cluster of other must-see attractions. The experience will be most successful if you prepare your children with a history lesson, although if you give them the full gory story of the place they might think you're making it up.

It started with William the Conqueror, who, in the early 1070s, began building a huge tower in the middle of a stone fortress as a way of emphasizing his dominion over England and protecting himself from his many enemies.

It continued in the 12th century with Richard the Lionheart, whom your children may recognize as the sovereign who skipped town to go on a crusade, leaving the country to his brother John, the villain in all those Robin Hood legends. The parade of events continued with the kidnapping and killing of the two pre-adolescent sons of Edward IV, which gave Shakespeare the inspiration to portray Richard III, the boys' uncle, as a not very nice man. Three queens were

among those beheaded on Tower Green, which became a site for celebrity executions.

On a more cheerful note, the Tower is the home of the Crown Jewels, spectacular gems from various parts of the British Empire, including the 530 carat Cullinan I, set in the monarch's scepter.

The guides at The Tower are officially called Yeoman Warders, and unofficially "Beefeaters," because it used to be that part of their salary was paid in beef. They're retired military officers who have been coaxed into comedy: Their tours come off like Monty Python.

There are several very informal cafes within the Tower complex. You're also allowed to picnic on the grounds, if it doesn't bother you that you'll be eating near the places where people literally lost their heads.

The London Eye, Dali Universe, the London Aquarium

The London Eye looks like the world's biggest Ferris wheel and moves like the world's biggest snail. One complete rotation takes 45 minutes. You can get on anytime because the gigantic circle is so slow that you can easily hop aboard one of the lozenge-shaped capsules as soon as it touches down. The Eye, which opened in 2000 as part of the global frenzy over the Millennium, offers stunning panoramic views of London but little else. It has no information about what you're looking at: no soundtrack, no map. Bring a good map and a guide book, so you can tell your offspring what they're looking at.

Next to the Eye is London's County Hall, home to institutions including the Aquarium and the Dali Universe. The surrealist jokester's work might actually appeal to your children more than to you (or me.) Among the exhibits is Dali's famous "Mae West Lips Sofa," in the shape of a pair of pouty, juicy red lips, and the monumental painting of eyeballs that the artist made for the 1945 Hitchcock movie "Spellbound."

The Aquarium is in the Hall's dark, dank basement, which gives it an underwater ambience. Glamorous it's not, but it does a good job explaining its mission, in which conservation plays a large part. In addition to the splendid elegance of the fish swimming in the tanks, there's a screen that tells you how many tons of fish the world is consuming, supplied by the Marine Stewardship Council, which is concerned with sustainable fishing, and a display of non-biodegradable trash from the Thames.

A fun place for lunch, also in County Hall, is the Aji Japanese Canteen, kitted out with indoor picnic tables. You raise your hand when you're ready to order, and the service is speedy. The paper menu, which you can walk away with, explains Japanese cuisine, so if you're a novice you need not feel uncomfortable about not knowing even the basics of noodles and miso soup. Children's menus are very inexpensive and include fresh squeezed juice as well as choices of chicken, fish and vegetables. This is a nice chance to expose your kids to a delightful experience in an exotic cuisine.

St. Paul's Cathedral, the "Wobbly" Bridge, Tate Modern, Tate Britain

St. Paul's Cathedral is perhaps most famous to foreigners as the site of the wedding of the Prince of Wales and the late Lady Diana Spencer, a fairytale event with a sour outcome. The current St. Paul's is the fifth on this land: The others burned down. Number four went in the Great Fire of London in 1666. Thirty-five years later, no time at all in building a great cathedral, Sir Christopher Wren's baroque-style edifice adorned with white marble and gold mosaics became the only English cathedral to open while its designer was still alive.

St. Paul's dominates the London skyline, and is so massive that it is sure to impress even the most jaded child. It is, for children of a responsible age, a vertical experience with a chance for their parents to rest in the pews below. My sons always loved any opportunity to climb in historic properties and St. Paul supplies a series of terrific ones, with 163 steps to the Whispering Gallery inside the dome, where the acoustics mean that a whisper spoken against one wall can be heard all the way across the space. For intrepid children, there is a further climb, this one outside the dome, of 119 steps and yet another of 152 steps that offers thrilling views. If your children are gone for more than an hour, it's time for you to check on them.

For lunch, across the street from St. Paul's, is a branch of the restaurant group Café Rouge, which will make you and your children feel like you've gone on a day-trip to Paris. While you're tucking into such traditional French dishes as duck confit, your offspring can choose from a special, and quite inexpensive, children's menu.

The fun way to cross the Thames from St. Paul's to Tate Modern is via the pedestrian "Wobbly Bridge," aka the Millennium Bridge, which had to be tweaked after its alarming swaying during its opening day in 2000. It's now perfectly safe.

There's an equally fun way to travel from Tate Modern to Tate Britain in Millbank. It's a bit too far to walk, so the two museums have collaborated on the Tate Boat, which travels on the Thames quite speedily between the two, with an additional stop at the London Eye. From Tate Modern to Tate Britain is a mere 18 minutes: Your kids will probably wish it were longer.

The story of Tate Modern begins in the early 1990s, when it had become apparent that no matter how many more additions could be squeezed onto the Millbank site of what's now called Tate Britain, the Tate collections weren't going to fit. Hence the decision to turn a redundant power plant on the South side of the Thames into Tate Modern. "Modern" was defined as 1900 and onward. (Some museums that had had Departments of 20th century art had a real problem when the Millennium arrived.)

The architects chosen to turn the power station into a museum were a then little-known Swiss team, Herzog & De Meuron. To their credit, their proposal was non-invasive. This was not a statement of architectural hubris. Their best addition is a glass cap of colored light atop the existing soaring, spire-like chimney.

Tate Modern's most stunning interior feature is Turbine Hall, 35 metres high and 152 metres long. It forms a fabulous entrance to the museum, and a great play space for children. In many museums, you ascend a grand and even intimidating staircase to enter the galleries. At Turbine Hall, you travel downward, as if into a gigantic cave or a mine. And the Hall is more than a lobby. It is the site of a series of long-term majestic sculptural installations that allow artists what is easily the biggest – in terms of space – opportunity of their lives. Children, and grown-ups, can often be seen lying down on the sloping floor of Turbine Hall, taking in whatever installation is there at the time.

Tate Britain's origins are with Sir Henry Tate, whose fortune came from inventing the process that resulted in the sugar cube. He was also a philanthropist and an art collector. He collected the art of his own era and country, 19th century England. By 1889 he decided to donate it to the nation. The nation didn't want it. Britain, never a leader in visual arts to the extent that Italy and France were, was uncertain about its own art, preferring work certified by foreign countries, and the fact that Tate's collection was modern made it all the harder to give away.

Sir Henry, both magnanimous and determined, offered to build a separate structure to hold his collection if the government provided the land. The government's efforts were lackadaisical and fruitless, and in 1892 Sir Henry withdrew his offer. In a letter to *The Times* he wrote that his goal had been a gallery that would have "attracted gifts of high class pictures and sculptures and thus have become the permanent home of the best examples of British art."

Finally, when the huge Peppercaster Prison on the Thames was scheduled for demolition, the government, with a new chancellor in office, offered part of that site to Tate and he accepted. The Millbank location seemed chosen to be as far as possible from the museums clustered around Trafalgar Square, and even today, Millbank seems out of the way. Nonetheless, Tate and his architect, Sidney Smith, proceeded with a plan intended to outdo the National Gallery in terms of lighting, painting-friendliness, and sheer grandeur.

Tate's front is in the form of a temple, with Corinthian columns, a ceremonial staircase, and liberal use of architectural influences from antiquity through the Baroque. Adornments include sphinxes, winged lions, unicorns and other mythical beasts. At the peak of the pediment is the majestic figure of Britannia.

Inside are masterworks by William Hogarth, Thomas Gainsborough, John Constable, George Stubbs, William Blake, and J.A.M. Whistler - a Who's Who of British art. Sir Henry's personal taste ran toward the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, and especially John Everett Millais. Like those of the other PRY painters, Millais' works were heavily illustrative, romantic and moralistic: scenes from Shakespeare, the Bible, literature and legends predominate. The current view of the PRB is that it is sentimental and suspiciously pretty. But thinking about art goes in cycles, and Henry Tate's favorite painter will no doubt come in for renewed appreciation one of these decades.

From the original 65 pictures in Sir Henry's gift, the Tate's holdings have jumped to 65,000. Among the works in the

Tate most beloved by the public are those by Joseph Mallord William Turner, perhaps the greatest painter Britain has produced. Turner, who died in 1851, tinkered with his ever more arcane will for over 20 years. It was five years after his death when a British court decreed that the works he left to the nation, which came with meticulous stipulations, would go temporarily to the National Gallery. It was more than another half century before Sir Joseph Duveen built the suite of galleries at the Tate that house the world's largest collection of Turners, a staggering 300 oil paintings and 19,000 watercolors and drawings, shown on a rotating basis. Since 1987 they've been exhibited in the Clore Gallery, the most debated of the several extensions to the original Tate. Designed by James Stirling, Michael Wolford and Associates, the Clore Gallery is pure post-modern pastiche, with kindergarten colors, including zingy orange and lime green, outlining the exterior architectural elements. It's not a palette that suggests the dreamy colors of Turner, and, thank goodness, it calms down inside.

No one has ever equaled Turner's ability to paint a roiling sea so brilliantly that you can almost feel the gallery floor moving beneath you when looking at his canvases. He had no equals in his own time, so the competitor he set himself up against was the 17th century French master of atmospheric effects, Claude Lorraine. Turner stipulated in his will that two early masterpieces he gave to the National Gallery, "Dido Building Carthage" and "The Decline of Carthage," should always hang between two pictures by Claude. It was Turner's way of saying that he was Claude's equal. (More than a century and a half after Turner's death in 1751 another Claude, Claude Monet, would travel to London specifically to do battle with Turner in the department of atmospheric effects on water: hence Monet's series of the Houses of Parliament and the Thames.)

Turner's name is attached to the world's most famous contemporary art prize. Since its inception in 1984, the Turner Prize has been a lightning rod for the hoax-of-contemporary-art school, even awarding the £25,000 prize one year to an artist who merely had the lights in an otherwise empty gallery go on and off every so often.

Trafalgar Square: The National Gallery, The National Portrait Gallery, The Banqueting House at Whitehall, Somerset House, St. Martin-in-the-Fields

This is an itinerary you might want to divide between two days, depending on your stamina and that of your kids, and also on your style of tourism. Some people like the whistle stop approach; others want to linger over a single painting all day.

The National Gallery and its neighbor, the National Portrait Gallery, dominate Trafalgar Square, London's most impressive public plaza. Once a pedestrian nightmare – crossing the streets was as frightening as crossing a major artery in Cairo or Beijing – the square is slowly being reconfigured by architect Norman Foster, aka Lord Foster of Thames Bank.

While many of Europe's greatest national museums – the Prado, the Louvre and the Hermitage among them – began as royal collections that went public, the National Gallery was formed through an Act of Parliament in 1824 that

allocated £60,000 for the purchase of paintings from the collection of a private banker. The idea from the beginning was to provide masterpieces that everyone, whether commoner or king, could enjoy. (The Queen, meanwhile, still has what is generally considered the greatest collection of art in private hands.)

The National Gallery tells the story of Western painting from the end of the 13th century to the beginning of the 20th. Almost all the paintings are on view rather than being hidden away in storage. When, for their own safety during the bombings of World War II, they had to be stashed in a Welsh mine, the public so missed them that one painting a month was brought back to Trafalgar Square to hang in splendid isolation, often accompanied by the famed lunchtime piano concerts of Dame Myra Hess, who returned to London from the safety of America specifically to play in the National Gallery to cheer Londoners on during the Blitz.

Everyone has their own favorites among the treasures in the NG. Here are some of mine: "Venus and Mars" by Botticelli; "Avenue at Chantilly" by Cezanne; "A Woman Bathing in a Stream" by Rembrandt; "The Judgement of Paris" by Rubens; "Saint Catherine of Alexandria" by Raphael; "A Boy and a Girl with a Cat and an Eel" by Judith Leyster (one of the very few 17th century Dutch masters who was a woman); Hogarth's series "Marriage a la Mode"; Jan van Eyck's "Portrait of Giovanni Arnolfini and his Wife Giovanna Cenami"; Anthony van Dyck's "Equestrian Portrait of Charles I"; Courbet's "In the Forest"; Gainsborough's "The Painter's Daughters chasing a Butterfly"; Constable's "Salisbury Cathedral from the Meadows"; Chardin's "The Young Schoolmistress"; and Claude's "Seaport with the Embarkation of Saint Ursula."

My all-time favorite work in the collection, though, is the great Leonardo cartoon (i.e. preparatory drawing) of "The Virgin and Child with Saint Anne and Saint John the Baptist." This charcoal and chalk drawing is so soft that you can't detect a single line. It is a perfect example of "sfumato", a term derived from "fumo", the Italian word for smoke. The Leonardo used to reside in its own shrine-like setting in a separate room with a bench where you could sit and ponder it. It's now been moved to a big gallery with another Leonardo, the painting "The Virgin of the Rocks", which is a shame. The other paintings in the room, while from the same era, detract from the hushed quality of the cartoon. On a visit to London last year, I filled out a complaint form at the suggestion of a guard, and on arriving home from London I had two e-mails from National Gallery staff explaining that not enough people saw the drawing when it occupied its own space. I still wish they'd put it back in its specially constructed room. (They couldn't just put up a "To the Leonardo Cartoon" sign?) But I was impressed at the Gallery staff's response, which demonstrated that they do indeed care about the views of their public.

Since your eye probably can't absorb more than a small fraction of the National Gallery's collections even if you spend an entire day there, it's wise, especially with children, to customize your visit by stopping at the ArtStart room first, where touch-screen computers will compose a personalized tour based on pretty much whatever you like: paintings of horses, paintings by a single artist or artists from a particular country or century, etc., and then print out

a map locating the particular works you want to see. This makes your time at the gallery a treasure hunt.

The Beatles. Ballerinas. The Queen, and most of her predecessors. They're all on display at the National Portrait Gallery, which marked its 150th birthday in 2006, thus vastly pre-dating celebrity publications like "People" and "Majesty" magazines but serving something of the same purpose. The NPG's mission is to collect images of famous Brits, whether or not the images themselves are top-quality. So fairly mediocre art hangs alongside masterpieces by the likes of Anthony van Dyck, Peter Paul Rubens, William Hogarth, Joshua Reynolds, and such contemporary artists as Andy Warhol, whose fame rivaled that of his subjects.

The galleries begin with the early Tudor dynasty and go right up to the present, although it wasn't until 1969 that portraits of living sitters were displayed. (After all, you never know when someone who's an instant hit is going to slip off the fame radar, leaving gallery-goers to ask "Who the heck is *that*?")

For those of us who are visual learners, the NPG offers what amounts to an entertaining course in British history. I've seen parents quizzing children on what they're looking at and why that particular sitter, be it a monarch, scientist or poet, is important to the Nation. The definition of "important" has changed since Lord Palmerston, then Prime Minister, proclaimed in 1856 that "There could be no greater incentive to mental exertion, to noble actions, to good conduct on the part of the living than for them to see before them the features of those who have done things which are worthy of our admiration, and whose examples we are more induced to imitate when they are brought before us in the visible and tangible shape of portraits."

Palmerston's Victorian morality makes a visit to the NPG sound roughly as appealing as attending an over-long service by a boring cleric in an unheated church. It's not. The gallery's guide acknowledges that "In the 1960s, Britain lost an empire but gained The Beatles and the Rolling Stones". So in today's NPG you'll find not only portraits of the Queen, the sovereign, but of Queen, the rock group.

The NPG's Portrait Restaurant has the finest view of any museum café in London. On the very top of the building, its glass wall looks out over Trafalgar Square, all the way to the Houses of Parliament. The food is good, especially the weekend brunch. Book ahead, and ask for a window table. Bring a well-illustrated guidebook so you'll be able to identify the monuments you're looking at. Make a game out of it with your children.

The Banqueting House at Whitehall is one of London's gems, and while it's only a ten minute walk from Trafalgar Square, it's not on the London 101 route, which, among other things, means it's unlikely to be a mob scene. Three things to know about the Banqueting House. One: It was designed by the great architect Inigo Jones for James I, and completed in 1622. Two: It is the site of a spectacular series of ceiling paintings by Rubens, commissioned by James's son and successor, Charles I, and installed in 1636. Three: It was the site of Charles's beheading in 1649.

The Banqueting House was built as a place of pleasure, where monarchs and courtiers participated in masques – a

hybrid form of entertainment with elements of a fancy dress ball and a play. The point of these productions wasn't just to have a good time. It was to establish the absolute authority of the Stuart dynasty. James and Charles had brilliantly talented artists at their disposal. Inigo Jones had studied in Italy, learning classical architecture and bringing back to England drawings by the great Italian architect Andrea Palladio. London had never seen anything like Jones's Banqueting House. It was originally part of Whitehall Palace, which, from 1530 until nearly the end of the 17th century was the monarch's principal residence. A sprawling complex in the Tudor style, its half-timbered buildings with their relatively small rooms covered 23 acres. Much of its role in English history ended abruptly, in the same way that the role of so many London landmarks did, when, in 1698, Whitehall Palace burned down. Except for the Banqueting House, which was built of stone. In designing it, Jones had used the proportions recommended by the first century BC Roman architect Vitruvius, advocate of the cube or double cube as the perfect forms for temples. Hence the Banqueting House's measurements: 55 feet wide x 55 feet high x 110 feet long. The extravagant space provided plenty of room for the masques that Jones also designed. A polymath, his gifts extended to extraordinarily elaborate sets and costumes for these productions. His sets could go from a fiery Hell to a golden paradise almost instantly.

His collaborator was none other than the great playwright Ben Jonson. The masque already existed before Jones and Jonson arrived on the scene, but they took it to a new degree of complexity and sophistication. Their productions opened with professional performers portraying a world of chaos and comedy. Part two involved audience participation, with the sovereigns and nobility depicting a universe of beauty, order and grace, a universe they ran for the welfare of everyone else. Stick with us was their message.

The masques moved out after Rubens moved in. The entertainments involved a lot of smoke and fire, and even long before the climate-controlled museum, people realized that smoke rising in a room with a Rubens ceiling was not a good idea. So another, and far less distinguished, building was erected for these productions, and the Banqueting Hall was used for more dignified – and smoke-free – courtly functions.

One reason Charles wanted to protect the ceiling paintings is that he'd paid £3,000 for them, an unheard-of sum for art in those days. (He waited two years to pay the bill.) The king got his money's worth, and then some. Rubens' nine paintings, which cover the entire ceiling, are breathtaking. They are also the only such suite of works by the famed Flemish artist to remain in their original setting. They are allegories, mixing biblical and mythological figures with images of James and Charles. Rubens' robust style was perfectly suited to these hammer-it-home political statements. (The other great Flemish painter of the day, Antony van Dyck, was Charles's court portraitist, but his more delicate style wouldn't have suited the ceiling's macho messages.) In one of the ceiling's paintings, "The Union of the Crowns", Charles is depicted as a naked babe, with Minerva, goddess of wisdom, holding the joined crowns of England and Scotland over his head. In the central painting, "The Apotheosis of James I", the king who once told his parliament that "the State of Monarchy is the supremest thing upon earth" is shown leaving the planet, his foot

firmly on a globe, his ascension to heaven attended by a chorus of fluttering angels.

England eventually tired of the idea of the divine right of kings, which both James and Charles pushed to the max. Ironically, given the themes of the masques and the Rubens paintings, the Banqueting House was the place of Charles's execution after being convicted for treason. On January 30, 1649, the King stepped out of one of the North doorways and onto scaffolding where he was beheaded. "I go from a corruptible to an incorruptible Crown" he said at his end. There is additional irony in the fact that Charles's replacement, Oliver Cromwell, ruled only until his unlamented death in 1658, after which Parliament promptly restored the monarchy. In 1660, Charles II, son of Charles I, arrived at the Banqueting House after a triumphal procession through London. He was greeted by both Houses of Parliament, whose members pledged their loyalty to him.

Over the centuries, the Banqueting House has been used for some pretty weird purposes. One was an ancient rite called "Touching for the King's Evil" in which the monarch laid hands on those suffering from scrofula, a disease this ceremony was said to cure. On the other hand, it also seems odd that, given its history, nowadays anyone with enough money can rent the Banqueting Hall for corporate functions.

Tip: Watch the excellent brief video presentation of the Hall's history. And grab one of the few mirrored tables as soon as the person before you gives it up. Instead of straining your neck muscles to view the ceiling, you wheel the table around and look down, where you see the ceiling's reflection. You'll want to look up as well, of course, and for that, you might want to bring a good pair of binoculars.

Need a quick lunch in a suitably historic setting after a visit to the Banqueting Hall? Try the Café-in-the-Crypt, located, as the name suggests, in the crypt of St. Martin-in-the-Fields, the church in Trafalgar Square. The Crypt is also headquarters for the London Brass Rubbing Centre, a child-friendly activity where the staff teach you how to create your own images of kings and queens, knights and unicorns. It's a painless, pleasant history lesson and children like the idea of walking away with a souvenir they've made themselves.

To Americans, the church might look extremely familiar. Its early 18th century James Gibbs architecture, with Corinthian columns, triangular pediment and graceful steeple, inspired countless North American churches. St. Martin is the prototype for the quintessential church on a New England village green.

But what St. Martin is best known for is The Academy of St. Martin-in-the-Fields, founded in the acoustically superb building in 1959. Recordings by this distinguished musical ensemble have made the church famous world-wide. The Academy is hardly the start of St. Martin's musical history, though - Handel performed here. This particularly hospitable church also offers free lunchtime concerts.

If you have an ounce of energy left after this rather packed itinerary, use it on Somerset House. Until a few years ago, the thousands of pedestrians who throng the Strand every day might have peeked inside the wide gate of a big old building much in need of a good scrub, seen a parking lot,

and continued on their way. Nowadays they might stop in their tracks to watch the action in the great courtyard. Children cavort in an elaborately choreographed fountain on steamy summer days; families ice skate there in the winter, when the courtyard becomes a gigantic frozen rink. It's a great urban space to let children run around in safety, as it's confined on all four sides, except for the entrance. For parents, there are tables and chairs to watch their offspring work off all that energy.

Somerset House, one of the few grand palaces still standing in London, and the one with the oldest and most convoluted history, is the home of three museums: The Courtauld Institute of Art Gallery; the Gilbert Collection; and the Hermitage Rooms. There are restaurants, museum, gift and book shops as well within the complex, and views of the Embankment and the Thames beyond.

In the spirit of "The Complete Works of William Shakespeare (Abridged)" in which three cheeky Americans condensed all the Bard's plays into 90 minutes, I'll attempt to summarize the 450 year history of Somerset House in a few paragraphs.

The market for Thames-side real estate was heating up when Edward Seymour, self-styled Lord Protector and Duke of Somerset, began construction of his palatial digs in 1547, clearly without checking the zoning rules of the time. Tearing down ecclesiastical buildings to erect an architectural monument to his own glory got him indicted and briefly thrown into the Tower of London. Once freed, he continued building. Somerset House was completed in 1551, but the Duke didn't have much time to enjoy it, as he was arrested again the same year, this time on charges of treason rather than construction offenses. Back to the Tower he went, to be executed in 1552.

Several monarchs lived in the house subsequently, including Charles I and Henrietta Maria, his Catholic consort, for whom he built an expensive chapel. A Roman Catholic chapel in a Royal Palace did not boost Charles's popularity, and we know what subsequently happened to him. (See above, on the Banqueting House at Whitehall.)

The great architect Inigo Jones died in 1642 at Somerset House, which he had helped to redesign. After Oliver Cromwell's death in 1658 his body lay in state there. So unmourned was one of history's all-time killjoys that one diarist of the time wrote "It was the joyfulest funeral I ever saw; for there were none that cried but dogs..."

By the late 18th century, Somerset House had fallen into such disrepair that the roofs couldn't keep out the rain. The old pile was pulled down and a new building, essentially the imposing neo-classical edifice of today, went up.

The first of the museums you'll encounter is the Courtauld. Its ornate rooms with stucco ceilings and marble fireplaces form a suitable setting for canonical paintings from more than half a millennium, many the gifts of private collectors including Samuel Courtauld, for whom the institute is named, and Roger Fry, the member of the Bloomsbury group who was himself a painter as well as advocate of modernism, especially of Cezanne. Fry's formalist views - that works from different centuries and cultures can all be

evaluated through the same visual criteria – influenced the way we look at art today.

Courtauld, whose fortune came from a family textile business, spent the 1920s amassing one of the world's great caches of Impressionist and Post-Impressionist works, the ones for which the Institute is best known. His most expensive acquisition was Renoir's "La Loge," painted in 1874, before the artist's descent into repetition and sentimentality. "La Loge," which was in the very first Impressionist show, hung over an Adam-style half-circular writing table in Courtauld's drawing room in Portman Square. In the Institute that he was instrumental in founding, it hangs over the same desk.

In the "They have that painting *here?*" department is Manet's masterpiece of the early 1880s, "A Bar at the Folies-Bergere", an art historical icon with non-stop spatial riddles, thanks, in part, to the mirrored background. When painters want to show off their skills, the mirror is a device much in favor.

The Gilbert Collection is built around opulence. Sir Arthur Gilbert, who was born Arthur Bernstein, the son of Polish parents who had moved to London in the late 19th century, took the surname of his wife, Rosalinde Gilbert, a fashion designer. While this might smack of denying his Jewish roots, his extraordinary generosity to Jewish causes including the Hebrew University of Jerusalem puts paid to that idea. Gilbert made money in the fur trade in London and then in real estate in Los Angeles. Before his death in 2001, he'd amassed 800 objects in European silver, gold, and Italian mosaics, and given it all to the British nation. It's probably the second most glittering collection on view in London, after the Crown Jewels.

The Hermitage, in St. Petersburg, is one of the world's greatest collections of European art, with over 3,000,000 *things* in its six sprawling buildings along the River Neva. What it doesn't have is enough money to restore those fragile edifices dating from the mid-18th century - hence the Hermitage "branches". There's one in Las Vegas, one in Amsterdam, and one in Somerset House, all intended to contribute to the coffers of the mother institution. (In gentler times, the rule was that museums loaned to each other without thought of asking for payment beyond transport and insurance. It's a different world now, one in which museums establish what amounts to franchises, to rent out their most cherished works for as much money as possible in order to help pay for repairs back home.)

What's always struck me as odd about the Hermitage Rooms in Somerset House is that, while rooms in the real Hermitage are mostly as big as football fields, the ones in Somerset House are rather small. The changing exhibition of loans from St. Petersburg are often of interest, but the setting has little to do with the majesty of the objects' Russian home.

South Kensington: The Science Museum, the Natural History Museum, the Victoria and Albert Museum.

This is one of the greatest assemblages of museums on the planet. If you can, allow a full day to explore them.

The Science Museum is centered by an echoing atrium with a huge ring with provocative messages including "Is there any point to trying to save energy on your own?" It's a sort of indoor *son et lumiere* experience. Energy is one of the big themes here. Steam displays come with enlightening text: "By 1800, 80% of the world's coal was being mined in Britain." Around 1712, Thomas Newcomer built the first practical steam engine, which made massive mining of coal possible. But it was also the beginning of the world's dependence on fossil fuels, which we're now trying to keep in check.

For younger children – anyone old enough to crawl through age eight – the museum offers The Pattern Pod Gallery, where everything is at ground level or slightly raised. Among the patterns are some in relief to feel and others that light up when crawled or walked on. The idea is to teach the museum's youngest visitors that there is order in the world.

The museum also has a branch of Waterstone's, the bookseller, with a huge array of children's science books and a selection of toys and games designed to make kids think about, among many other topics, how air traffic controllers work.

The Natural History Museum's stars are the dinosaurs, or what's left of them. The museum's mission is to make its exhibits fun and accessible to children of all ages. A program called "Bookasaurus," for instance, is designed for those under five years old. Your child borrows a fabric dinosaur book from the Central Hall desk and follows a trail through the museum, finding out what dinosaurs ate and what their footprints looked like, among other things. For under 7's there's the "Dippy Floor Puzzle," a dinosaur soft toy floor game where the goal is to put together the pieces of a Diplodocus skeleton. Under 7's can also participate in "Explorers", for which they borrow a red backpack filled with pens, paper, games and activities, and take a tour around the museum. For children at least 12 years old there's a Botany Explore tour that takes them behind the scenes.

For the child in all of us, there are 70 million specimens of animals, plants, minerals and fossils, some dating from the time of Sir Hans Sloane, an 18th century collector who amassed over 80,000 items in various categories.

Indisputably the world's greatest collection of decorative arts and design, the Victoria & Albert is affectionately known as "Granny's Attic". Those of us married to people who can never throw anything out understand the museum's philosophy as soon as we walk through the door, envying its seven miles of gallery space, planning new wings for our own houses. The V & A has roughly four million objects: sculpture, glass, jewelry, armor, weapons, furniture, architecture, photography and more, representing cultures from all over the world. It's wise to make your first stop at the information desk, where you can pick up a map and ask for guidance. You're not going to see it all in one day. It's

not a straightforward presentation as, say, the National Gallery, which presents the history of European painting in chronological order. After a couple of hours at the V & A your feet may hurt. So be choosy about your route.

Over that information desk at the main Cromwell Road entrance hangs a delightfully tangled glass chandelier, a nine metre high eruption of yellow, green and blue light, by the American glass master Dale Chihuly. It's but the first of the museum's showstoppers including Grinling Gibbons's c.1690 "Cravat" carved in lime wood and so convincing in its lace-like effect that its former owner, the connoisseur Horace Walpole, wore it at a dinner party in honor of visiting dignitaries from abroad, given at his neo-Gothic home, Strawberry Hill, in 1769. Walpole recorded that "the French servants stared and firmly believed that this was the dress of English Country Gentlemen".

The V & A was the outgrowth of the Great Exhibition of 1851, when an array of international industrial design was on view in London's Crystal Palace. The museum was first called the Museum of Manufactures, then the Museum of Ornamental Art, then the South Kensington Museum, and, finally, the Victoria and Albert Museum. Queen Victoria herself reopened it in 1899 as her last official act before her death in 1901. It was, to her, a tribute to the practical good sense of her beloved consort, who predeceased her by 40 years.

The museum takes a hands-on approach. So a gallery of bronzes has samples of different patinas you're invited to touch, and in the textile galleries are Japanese kimonos you can try on – and try to wrap correctly.

Among the newer treats at the V & A is the Jameel Gallery, devoted to the arts of the Islamic Middle East. It opened in 2006, at a time of particular turbulence in that part of the world. Its 400 objects, beautifully presented, date from 622, when Muhammad established the first Muslim community in Medina, to the end of the Ottoman Empire in 1922. Among its star attractions is a majestic 15th century Egyptian "minbar" or "pulpit" made of cedar with ivory inlays, and the glorious 16th century Iranian Ardabil Carpet, densely woven, with 304 knots per square inch.

Near the Jameel Gallery is the first British presentation of work by the acclaimed Iranian-born artist Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian, who works with mirrored mosaics and Islamic geometric patterns to create huge, glittering murals. It's hard to tear your eye away from them.

For lunch or dinner: I've never found the South Kensington museum cafes a satisfying experience. Go around the corner instead to Oratory, a delightful bistro. The décor, menu and service are all fun. No Michelin stars here, but a very good lunch at a very good price. It's named after the nearby Brompton Oratory, London's principal Roman Catholic Church, which is also worth a visit. The late 19th century building was deliberately designed in the Renaissance style that the Order's Roman founder, the 16th century St. Philip Neri, grew up with.

The British Museum

The British Museum has mummies. I've never met a child who wasn't attracted to mummies, so a visit to the mummy galleries is a good way to start exploring this rather intimidatingly large place, which will probably take your entire day. "Mummy: The Inside Story" is a family tour given several times a day. Have your concierge book ahead, as it's extremely popular.

The history of the British Museum began with the physician, naturalist and collector Sir Hans Sloane (see the Natural History Museum above), who had acquired a great library and herbarium by the time of his death in 1753. What to do with them? Sloane bequeathed them to King George II for the nation, provided the nation pay Sloane's heirs 20,000 pounds. Otherwise, the collection would be sold overseas. The King was more interested in wars – both with other countries and within his own family – than in cultural matters. It took an Act of Parliament to acquire the collection for Britain.

The British Museum opened to the public on January 15, 1759, in Montagu House, a 17th century mansion on the site of the current museum. The collections grew speedily, with Greek vases, the Rosetta Stone and other Egyptian antiquities, the sculptures from the Parthenon, and other treasures pouring in. The Museum outgrew Montagu House, and the quadrangular building of today, designed by Sir Robert Smirke, opened in 1852. It was followed by the round Reading Room, designed by Robert's brother Sydney, which opened in 1857. The 1850s saw the huge expansion of acquisitions in European prehistory, Asian art and archeology.

The British Museum was, at first, a haven for scholars, but during the 19th century things we now take for granted in museums made it more accessible. The museum stayed open on many public holidays. It published guidebooks, offered public lectures, and designed displays to be attractive and intelligible. Scholars didn't need beautiful settings for objects; the general public craved them and responded to them. Attendance of a few thousand in the early years gradually grew to the 5 million visitors of today.

The galleries became ever more crowded, with things and with people. Collections were transferred. The natural history material moved to South Kensington, to what would become the Natural History Museum. The ethnographic collections moved to Burlington Gardens, behind the Royal Academy building, in what was called the Museum of Mankind. This was a poor strategy in terms of treating African, Oceanic and arts of the Americas as something "other", not worthy of being in the same building with important work from Rome, Greece and Egypt. Eventually, the British Museum realized the political incorrectness of the move. The Museum of Mankind closed in 1997. Its collections went back to the British Museum and the Department of Ethnography – the very term "ethnography" is considered demeaning to work now regarded as art - was re-christened the Department of Africa, Oceania and the Americas. The Sainsbury Galleries for African Art – it was the sculptor Henry Moore who interested the wealthy Sainsbury family in this material – are particularly successful. Weapons are displayed in glass cases that allow you to see them in the round. Pots are ingeniously topped with mirrored glass that simulates the water they once held.

The collections of rare books suffered a similar although apparently permanent fate as the “ethnographic” art, when, in the late 1990s, they were moved to the British Library in St. Pancras, a less convenient area than the Bloomsbury home of the British Museum. Since the British Museum had been founded on collections of books, the displacement made many people unhappy. For those of us who grew up entering the British Museum and making a dash to see Lewis Carroll’s original “Alice in Wonderland” and other beloved books in the authors’ own hands, the move out of the British Museum to St. Pancras was disappointing.

The additions and renovations to the museum continued through the 19th and 20th centuries. Among the more notable expansions was the Duveen Gallery, completed in 1939 but, because of World War II damage, not opened until 1962. The lofty space is filled with work that is even more controversial than the move of the book collections – the marble sculptures of the Parthenon, the temple atop the Acropolis, which was dedicated to the goddess Athena in 432 B.C.

In 1799 Thomas Bruce, seventh Earl of Elgin, was appointed British ambassador to Constantinople and almost immediately put into action a plan he’d hatched years before, to bring Greek antiquities to England to make his countrymen aware of that nation’s ancient culture. He sent emissaries and workmen to remove sculptures from the pediment, a frieze, a caryatid and other pieces, which he shipped to London in 1804. The works spent over a decade in a couple of London sheds, rotting from the damp, as Elgin tried to sell them to the nation for a price the nation didn’t want to pay. A Parliamentary committee in 1815 called for Britain to house the marbles in a place “safe from ignorance and degradation”, i.e. “safe” from their home. Britain finally bought the marbles in 1816, and the sculptures were quickly transferred to the British Museum, ultimately to the Duveen Gallery.

The question of their return came up soon, and hasn’t gone away. Lord Byron wrote of the looting that “the sea-ruling Britannia snatched the last spoils of Greece, that was in the throes of death.” Even now, when dozens of Western museums are returning art acquired under suspicious circumstances, the British Museum remains adamant about keeping the Parthenon marbles, along with other cultural monuments including the Rosetta stone and even the Sphinx’s beard. The problem is exacerbated by the Parthenon marbles being an intrinsic part of a building, not free-standing statues. Recently, the British Museum’s longstanding position that it was “protecting” the marbles was challenged by some scholars who said they’d been over-cleaned.

Enconced in the Duveen Gallery, the great marbles are at once overwhelmingly beautiful and sad. It’s possible, as you marvel at the muscular gods and the goddesses clad in clinging “wet” drapery that fully reveals their figures, the drama of a rearing horse’s head and the stunning sense of life and movement, to decide that two and a half millennia after they were created, there has been nothing to top these works in figurative sculpture. They are, of course, fragments, however huge, but arranged as they were on the Parthenon, leaving visitors to fill in the blanks using their

imaginations. Everyone who sees these works inevitably forms an opinion of where they belong.

The latest major renovation to the British Museum is the Great Court designed by Lord Foster, which opened in 2000. Foster’s trademark is glass – lots of it. The court is covered with a giant glass dome. The space underneath it is the largest covered square in Europe. The thousands of triangular panes of glass cast lovely lattice-work shadows on the interior walls. But all that glass also means that no light-sensitive art can be shown here, and the few stone sculptures seem chosen to blend in with the color of the stone walls. They’re overwhelmed by the café, the shops, and the information kiosks. At the heart of the space, though, is one of the more significant sites in the history of human ideas: the round reading room where Leon Trotsky, Karl Marx and Sun Yat-Sen worked, possibly on hatching revolutions. Among other notable “ticket holders” were Ezra Pound, Virginia Woolf and Oscar Wilde. Touch-screen computers designed to blend in with the historic décor, now restored to look the way it did in 1857, tell you all about what went on in this storied space.

The Museum’s Court Restaurant, one flight up from the hubbub of the ground floor, serves fine food, by museum restaurant standards. Be sure to book one of the tables that overlook the Reading Room. On the ground floor is a less formal café.

If, after your visit to the British Museum, you’d like something smaller and easier to cope with, try the nearby Dickens’ House, where the author lived for only two years, but productive they were: Here he wrote “Oliver Twist” and other classics that your children may have read.

The Imperial War Museum, the Florence Nightingale Museum, the Old Operating Theatre, the Museum of Garden History.

When my boys were young the Imperial War Museum in the Lambeth section of London was one of their favorite attractions in the entire city. Somehow, 15 years ago war didn’t feel as immediate as it does today, and the two World Wars that form the core of the exhibits and activities of the IWM are easier to justify than what’s going on in Iraq. The exhibitions on the Holocaust and “The Children’s War” which document, through their own words, the evacuation of thousands of children from London before and during the Blitz, are intensely moving. “The Children’s War” will fascinate youngsters of similar ages, and perhaps even make them feel fortunate in comparison to those young evacuees separated from their families. The Holocaust show is grimmer fare, and may be too much for some children to handle, so have a grown-up run-through first.

Before you get to any of the shows, though, there’s the building itself. It is a huge, forbidding, domed structure, with two guns dating from 1914, each weighing 100 tons, and each capable of shooting a shell at a target 16 miles away. It’s not particularly welcoming, its history is even less so. It was formerly the Bethlem Royal Hospital, the history of which dates back to 1247. As a lock-up facility for the insane, it gave birth to the word “Bedlam.” Among its inmates were artists and arsonists, and A.W.N. Pugin, architect of the Houses of Parliament.

The Museum had various homes after its inauguration in 1920. It moved to its current site in 1936, only to be closed from 1940 – 1946, when its valuable collections were moved out of London lest they be bombed by the Germans. The collections eventually returned, and the biggest exhibits now occupy the cavernous central gallery, which has room for a bevy of tanks, guns, periscopes - and aircraft of the “Snoopy and the Red Baron” vintage, suspended from the ceiling. The Museum also includes art, most notably John Singer Sargent’s 1919 “Gassed”. Sargent, portraitist of suave socialites, was commissioned by the British War Memorials Committee to make something entirely different, a large-scale image of war. Urged on by Prime Minister Lloyd George, the painter spent four months at the Western Front, sketching what would become an epic, 20 foot long, frieze-like image of a line of mustard-gas victims, blinded or nearly, holding onto each other lest they stumble. Golden light washes over the sunset scene; the moon rises in the background. Poetry and tragedy quietly mix here.

The cafe at the IWM always strikes me as rather cold and clinical. So when I visit the museum I eat across the street, at a comfy, cozy pub called The Three Stags. British pubs have varying policies regarding children, from “go away” to banishing them to a back room, to welcoming them. The Three Stags falls into the latter category. On the sunny Saturday afternoon when I last visited, roughly half the customers were under age four. Babies, toddlers, older children, their parents and grandparents were all having a lovely time. And the food is fine pub fare.

Do you yearn to know the history of the lawnmower? Do you know what “tulipmania” was? If you’re intrigued by such questions, the Museum of Garden History is worth a visit. It is located in and around St. Mary-at-Lambeth, a 14th century church restored in 1851 and scheduled for demolition in the 1970s when it was discovered that the family tomb of the Tradescants was located in the overgrown churchyard. The church, in Perpendicular Gothic style, was rescued.

I’m not sure how I feel about the Tradescants, who were royal gardeners to Charles I and II. They were also travelers who, in the 17th century, ventured as far East as Russia and West to North America, collecting plants and introducing them to Britain long before customs inspectors started seizing foreign plant material. One specimen they brought back from America was named for them - “Tradescantia” common name “Spiderwort”. In my early days as a black-thumbed gardener, I bought some Tradescantia out of a plant catalogue because it was labeled “may become invasive” which I took to mean that perhaps even I couldn’t kill it. It did indeed become invasive and now a significant part of my summer gardening consists of trying to get rid of it.

The Tradescant tomb is located in the knot garden in back of the church, a replica of one from the Tradescants’ era. Knots were tremendously important in centuries past, used to lash buildings together and to fasten clothing in pre-zipper days. They had symbolic value as well, representing marriage and other ties that bind. The patterns in knot gardens were related to those in embroidery. The stable plant was a low box hedge laid out in elaborate geometric designs. The knot garden at the museum incorporates the initial “T” for Tradescant four times. There’s not a single original knot

garden left in England, because by the 18th century they were out of style, and landscaping turned toward a less formal, more natural design, championed by Lancelot “Capability” Brown. The museum’s wall texts question whether Brown, who wiped out lots of knot gardens, was villain or visionary.

As for the lawn mower, it was patented by one, Edwin Budding in 1830. Previously, lawns were cut by the extremely time-consuming and also messy means of scything. And “Tulipmania,” in which the Tradescants participated, was a 17th century craze for bulbs that produced striped and other patterned blooms. The fad got so out of hand that a fine painting of these exotic flowers became less costly than the bulb that produced them.

It seems weird that the Garden Museum’s gift shop traffics in fake flowers, but appropriate that the café serves vegetarian food, the philosophy being that if it didn’t come out of the ground, it isn’t worth swallowing.

You can walk from either the IWM or the Museum of Garden History to one of London’s most charming small museums, and one directly related to the subject of war. The Florence Nightingale Museum tells the story of the “Lady with the Lamp”, the daughter of a wealthy Victorian family who broke convention by becoming a nurse, not a respected field for a woman in her time. She had to go to Germany to study as no professional training was available in England. Her fame came from leading a team of nurses to Turkey after the Crimean War broke out in 1854. She vastly improved standards of hygiene – and the rate of patient survival.

If your children want to be physicians when they grow up, take them to the Old Operating Theatre, which is also on the South Bank. It’s a short cab ride – or a long walk - from the Florence Nightingale Museum. Dating from 1822, the Operating Theatre is the oldest surviving one in Europe. The reason it’s still there is because it’s in the attic of St. Thomas’s Church in Southwark. After the church relocated, the operating theatre was boarded up until it was rediscovered in 1956.

Any child who has ever had even a minor surgical procedure with a local anesthetic will be horrified by what went on in this operating room, which was principally devoted to amputations. With no anesthesia at all, arms and legs were sawed off to try to save the lives of patients, many of whom eventually died of gangrene. Surgery was such a menial calling in the early 19th century that its practitioners were called “Mr.” rather than “Doctor”. Surgeons were more likely to wash their hands *after* an operation than before.

The Wallace Collection, the Sherlock Holmes Museum, Madame Tussaud’s, the London Zoo

You’re really not going to have time to do all of this in one day unless you’re an Energizer Bunny, so pick and choose. Were I you, I’d do The Wallace Collection and the Zoo, for reasons elaborated below.

I’ve never seen children having a better time in an art museum than the ones I observed one Sunday afternoon at The Wallace Collection. The Wallace boldly bills itself as “the finest collection of art ever assembled by one family”. Catherine the Great and a few other contenders might take

issue with this. Nonetheless, the Wallace Collection is superb, displaying the world-class treasures assembled for five generations of the Hertford family in a setting so grand that it served as the French Embassy in the mid-19th century.

The Wallace has vast collections of arms and armor, from both the Orient and Europe. They were collected by the Hertford family and displayed as art. An early 17th century Indian dagger has a solid gold hilt set with diamonds, rubies and emeralds. A 15th century Persian dagger has a hilt carved from jade. In the European section are sets of armor for horses and riders, both in the same style so that man and beast coordinated and appeared to be almost a single entity.

As part of its hands-on activities for children, there are replicas of some of the collections' armor for children to try on: breastplates, helmets, etc. They come in adult sizes as well. Both kids and adults find out that this gear was extremely heavy and awkward to move around in. Mirrors in the education room devoted to this activity show what everyone looks like wearing it.

Among the more sophisticated activities for children at the Wallace are drawing classes in the galleries that teach kids how to draw as the Old Masters did. In America, this would be viewed as not a good thing, the rationale being that children should be free to draw in whatever way they want. I disagree. Mastery of technique is a good thing.

More about the Wallace: the first collector in the Hertford family was Francis Seymour-Conway, the 1st Marquess of Hertford, whose life spanned nearly the entire 18th century. The Hertford family had great taste, no doubt about it, but their personal lives were hardly spotless. The 2nd Marquess's wife was the mistress of the Prince of Wales, later George IV, for a dozen years. The 3rd Marquess "lived a life of debauchery in London" the museum's official guidebook admits, while the fifth generation of collectors, Sir Richard Wallace, inherited his father's vast fortune but not his title, because Sir Richard was illegitimate.

Sir Richard's wife, Lady Wallace, survived him by seven years, living in isolation in the palatial setting of Hertford House, smoking black cheroots. When she died in 1897, she left to the British nation what was at the time its largest-ever bequest. When Hertford House opened in 1900 as The Wallace Collection, the public was astonished at its contents. You probably will be, too. The imposing house, begun in the 18th century and added on to by successive generations is an imposing, self-confident mansion set in its own grounds in Manchester Square. The location was originally chosen because there was good duck shooting nearby, which gives an indication of how rural the area was at the time. (It's now an extension of the hustle and bustle of Oxford Street). So significant is the building that in 1814 it was the site of the Allied Sovereigns' Ball celebrating the defeat of Napoleon.

Inside are marble floors and an ornate staircase carpeted in red. The Hertfords had a taste for things French, hence the vast quantities of over-the-top Sevres porcelain, Boule furniture, marble portrait busts by Jean-Antoine Houdon and paintings by Francois Boucher, Jean-Antoine Watteau, and Jean-Honore Fragonard. The family loved the pretty pictures of pre-Revolutionary France, and also fancied the curlicued decorative arts of the *ancien regime*. Dusting here must be quite the challenge.

Among the most stunning displays in the building is an alcove completely covered with Minton tiles in an Islamic design of flowers and leaves. Originally, the alcove was part of a smoking room. Upstairs is the biggest treat of all, an almost overwhelming Great Gallery with pictures by Peter Paul Rubens, Anthony van Dyck, Nicolas Poussin and other 17th century masters, hung salon-style, one above the other. Most were acquired by the 4th Marquess, who, when other collectors were focused on the Renaissance, was prescient in his preference for works of the Baroque era.

The Wallace has one of the most elegant museum restaurants in London, a covered-over courtyard that is bright, airy and family-friendly.

Unless your kids are familiar with Sherlock Holmes, The Sherlock Holmes Museum at the famous address of 221b Baker Street is going to look to them like a frumpy Victorian house. So before taking them there, acquaint them with the basics by renting, say, "The Hound of the Baskervilles" and a couple of other Sherlockiana films, as well as encouraging them to read some of the 60 stories by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. Or you could read them aloud to them. Up to you if, when visiting the museum, you mention that while it's in an authentic 19th century house, its two famous occupants – Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson – were purely fictional.

Madame Tussaud's is where my children and I always differed. Sure, the wax figures of famous people are impressive in their skill, but do you (and your offspring) really want to jostle the crowds to have a photo-op with them? My kids did. I didn't and don't. What interested me most the last time I visited was that, in the interest of keeping up to date, Princess Diana had been replaced by Camilla.

Before you even get to the London Zoo, you're surrounded by the vast green space of Regent's Park, a refreshing chance for children to run around. They can watch British kids practicing rugby. You can rent a rowboat, feed the ducks and geese, and admire the serene composure of the swans. And that's all before the Zoo itself, which is spectacular.

Opened in 1828, the London Zoo was the first to bill itself as a "scientific" zoo. Its founder, Sir Stamford Raffles, also founded Singapore, where there's a great hotel named for him. The London Zoo was the first in the world to open a reptile house (1849), aquarium (1853) and insect house (1881).

Animals' personalities are often invented by humans, but here goes. The zoo has a fleet of utterly adorable penguins that show off their swimming ability by going through the water at speeds of up to 19 miles an hour. If there were Olympic medals for animals, these guys would get the gold in the underwater category.

The giraffes and gorillas are among the superstars of London's zoo, but there are also smaller and no less fascinating animals. The gorgeous little golden-headed lion tamarin is a case in point. Almost extinct in its native habitat in a corner of Eastern Brazil, the tamarin is being given a good home that replicates its steamy quarters in South America.

THEATRE

London is the most famous theatre city in the world, and it would be a pity indeed not to take your kids to a show or two while visiting. Here are some of my recommendations for plays and musicals they might like. All, with noted exceptions, are booking at least until autumn of 2008:

“Spamalot” at the Palace Theatre. Based on the movie “Monty Python and the Holy Grail,” which you might want to rent beforehand, this is a hilarious send-up of the Arthurian legends that manages to make even the plague funny. Dour monks carry out one “corpse” who protests “I’m not dead yet!” The Lady of the Lake is demoted to the category of “strange women lying in ponds”, the Holy Grail becomes the “Holy Quail” i.e. dinner, while the Trojan Horse becomes the Wooden Rabbit. (There are obviously some liberties taken with the way history and myth are retold.) Anyway, it’s silliness taken to the nth degree. The more you acquaint your offspring with the cast of characters in the straight version of the King Arthur stories, the more they’ll enjoy this delightfully warped one.

“Billy Elliot” was an Oscar-nominated movie before it morphed into a musical now at the Victoria Palace Theatre. It’s a tale of grit vs. glamour, opening with black and white film footage of miners crawling underground, an episode guaranteed to induce claustrophobia in even the most comfortably seated audience member. “Billy Elliott The Musical” is set in 1984-85, during Britain’s nationwide miners’ strike after the government announced pit closures. It was a bloody era, with thousands of arrests. Billy’s father and brother were among the protesters, fearing that their meager living would disappear entirely. Billy is too young for the mines, so “Dad,” played by Philip Whitchurch, sends him to boxing lessons to toughen him up. After one lesson, he observes a ballet class taught in the same space. All the pupils are little girls, either pudgy or scrawny, and the class is taught by a Mrs. Wilkinson, played by Sally Dexter, who is one tough cookie. You get the feeling that if she were involved in the miners’ strike, they’d have a better chance against that other Iron Lady.

The rest is completely predictable. Billy falls in love with ballet. Billy’s father is horrified when he finds out that his son has secretly been taking classes with Mrs. Wilkinson, who, meanwhile, thinks Billy sufficiently talented to audition for the Royal Ballet School.

Children rule this musical. There are currently four Billy’s. The one I saw was Matthew Koon, an utterly endearing boy who just wants to dance. “Dance” for him includes acrobatics, tap, and anything else that gets him moving, working out that pre-adolescent energy.

One of Billy’s friends turns out to be a cross-dresser. The musical, to its credit, doesn’t whitewash the world of kids. There is a stunning dream duet for Billy and an older version of himself, played by Isaac James, in which the youngster actually seems to fly.

Boys are still in the minority in the ballet world, vastly outnumbered by girls dreaming of going on to glory as the next Margot Fonteyn or Darcy Bussell. Boys have fewer role models. Billy has none, just Mrs. Wilkinson urging him on. He operates almost in a vacuum, which makes his determination all the more impressive. Finally, of course,

Billy’s father accepts his son’s goal to dance professionally and takes him to London to audition for the Royal. When the fateful letter arrives, Billy opens it and reads out to his father and grandmother “William Elliott is queer.” Then his downhearted expression indicates that he hasn’t been accepted. Actually, he has. It turns out that Billy has acting abilities as well.

This is a show meant to move you, and the luminous, unselfconscious performances of the children certainly moved me. They haven’t been over-trained or over-coached. What wasn’t as convincing was Elton John’s score or Lee Hall’s lyrics. This is a musical, after all, and there ought to be some songs that linger in your head after the show.

Also highly recommended: “The 39 Steps” a spoof on the Alfred Hitchcock film, in which four actors play 139 roles, at the Criterion; “The Lord of the Rings” an enchanting interpretation of J.R.R. Tolkien’s epic trilogy, at Theatre Royal Drury Lane; and, at the Shaftesbury Theatre, “Hairspray: The Musical” about a 1960s American teenager who overcomes her frumpiness to become a dance star on TV. If your kids haven’t seen “Stomp”, “The Phantom of the Opera”, and “The Lion King” back home, this might be a good time to take them. And there’s always Agatha Christie’s “The Mousetrap” at St. Martin’s Theatre, which, in the words of the weekly entertainment guide “Time Out” is “booking to Doomsday”. It’s now in its 57th year. Nate, no. 2 son, is our only family member who hasn’t seen it, because his grandmother inadvertently told him “who dun it”, spoiling his chance for the fun of guessing. I’m thinking that hypnosis might blot the memory from his mind and we could still go.

In the days of Elizabeth I, drama companies performed in inns, colleges and even private homes. Only in 1576 was London’s first purpose-built playhouse, the Theatre in Shoreditch, erected. William Shakespeare joined that company in the 1580s. A legal dispute over the building’s lease led to the drastic solution of building a new theatre in Southwark. It proved so expensive that its owners sold shares in it to actors including Shakespeare. Some of his greatest plays premiered there. The theatre suffered the fate of many wooden buildings: It burned to the ground in 1613. It was quickly rebuilt, only to suffer the same fate of all English theatres in 1642, when it was closed by the Puritan regime. Two years later it was demolished.

Fast forward three centuries. The American actor and director Sam Wanamaker first visited London in 1949. Two decades later he founded the Shakespeare Globe Trust to reconstruct the theatre, a daunting project given that no one really knows what it looked like. The design of the new Globe was based on prints of the era, building contracts, and written accounts. The excavation of the Rose Theatre, a nearby rival of the Globe, showed that Elizabethan playhouses weren’t circular, as many people had believed, but polygonal. The reconstruction was as faithful as possible. The roof, for instance, is water reed thatch, based on samples recovered during the excavation of the Rose. Modern building codes had to be observed, of course, so

there are exit signs and fire retardant materials in the building.

The Globe is only partly roofed, as Elizabethan theatres were, and so it operates only in the warmer months, from April 23 (The Bard's birthday) to October 5 this year, with the repertory including "King Lear", "A Midsummer Night's Dream", "Timon of Athens", "The Merry Wives of Windsor" and two new plays, Che Walker's "The Frontline" and Glyn Maxwell's "Liberty".

Since seeing the Globe is such a wonderful experience in itself, it's worth visiting no matter what the play. In the rebuilt Globe, completed a decade ago, many audience members stand facing the stage, while the rest sit in steeply stacked galleries. Everyone feels extremely close to the action – especially the standees, who may be interrupted by actors in their midst.

The Globe also has a permanent display about theatre in Shakespeare's age, and regular tours.

Theatre tours are a fine way to get a glimpse of what goes on backstage. In addition to the Globe, other venues offer them. The National Theatre complex of three houses on the South Bank offers several tours daily, Monday through Saturday. A company called London Theatre Tours conducts regular excursions that focus on studying a single play, visiting Stratford-on-Avon or even improving your own acting skills in the company of pros.

London's theatres are a show in themselves. Like the Globe, the Savoy Theatre has a fascinating – if shorter – history. There has been a theatre on this site since 1881, before the building of the adjacent Savoy Hotel in 1889. Both were financed by the impresario Richard D'Oyly Carte with profits from Gilbert and Sullivan operettas, which are still regularly performed in the Savoy Theatre. Fun fact: Savoy Court, the tiny street off the Strand that leads to the theatre, is the only road in Britain where, by an act of Parliament, automobiles must drive on the right so that passengers enter the theatre directly, without having to walk around a car.

GLOSSARY, SPELLING and PRONUNCIATION

"England and America are two countries separated by a common language," quipped George Bernard Shaw. The American-born linguist M. Lynne Murphy, who lives and teaches in England, has a wildly funny view of the subject,

which she shares at

www.separatedbyacommonlanguage.blogspot.com/.

She observes, for instance, the common misapprehension among Americans that "high tea" means something quite fancy, when actually it's a simple family supper. "Afternoon tea" is the kind served at posh hotels.

Here are a few of my own random observations on the breach between British and American English and how to pronounce certain key words. A fun activity is collecting your own list.

"Jacket" potatoes in England are "baked" potatoes in America. A "biscuit" in Britain is a "cookie" in the US – the kind you eat, not the kind on your computer. "Soldiers" when mentioned in conjunction with soft-boiled eggs, are skinny pieces of toast. "Pudding" is the generic term for all desserts, so it takes in chocolate cake as well as the smooth creamy substance that's pudding in the US of A.

A "reservation" in America is a "booking" in England, although many London restaurants recognize what you're trying to do in either case. At the end of your meal, ask for the "bill," not the "check." ("Bill" makes more sense anyway, doesn't it?)

"Bespoke" clothing means custom-made. "Pyjamas" are "pajamas." What's the elevator in the US is the lift in London. "Private" school in America is "public" school in England, the most famous examples being Eton and Harrow. The English equivalent of an American public school is a state school.

The first floor in the US is the second floor in London, where the first floor is called the ground floor.

What's soccer in America is football in England, except for the Soccer Scene stores (see above), which may be so titled to appeal to Americans.

"Schedule" is pronounced "shedjool," without the hard "C". "Weekend" is pronounced "WeekEND," emphasis on the latter syllable. The "Mall", the street that goes from Trafalgar Square to Buckingham Palace, is pronounced to rhyme with Al Capone or Al Gore. There is no Bloomingdale's on the "Mall". Beauchamp Place in Knightsbridge is a French word that gets mangled into "Beechum". Controversy is "conTROvissy."

What's a "sweater" to Americans is a "jumper" to Britons, and even if you're in London in August, you may need to go out and buy one.

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