

L O N D O N

SECRET

THINK YOU KNOW LONDON? THINK AGAIN. RACHEL HOWARD AND BILL NASH INVITE YOU INTO A WORLD OF HIDDEN GEMS, FROM ECCENTRIC MOUSTACHE CLUBS TO FLOATING GALLERIES...

THE HANDLEBAR CLUB

Scratch the surface, and London is full of odd member's clubs such as the Veteran Cycle Club, the Time Travel Club, or the newly reformed Eccentric Club. Perhaps the oddest of them all is the Handlebar Club of Great Britain. It was founded in 1947 by Jimmy Edwards, a popular post-war comedian, who once sang, "Every girl loves a fella with a bush upon his mush!". The Handlebar Club originally had ten members; today, it has around 100 acolytes from all over the world. The club's mission was and remains "to bring together moustache wearers socially for sport and general conviviality". The criterion for membership is simple: prospective members must have "a hirsute appendage of the upper lip, with graspable extremities". Beards are banned. The other essential qualification is "to be able to drink plenty of beer" at the club's monthly get-togethers at the Windsor Castle pub, just off the Edgware Road. Naturally, the pub landlord, Michael Tierney, is a club member with impressive "lip foliage". About a dozen members usually show up at these monthly gatherings and they are unmistakable. Most are dressed in "member's regalia" – maroon silk ties emblazoned with a white moustache and matching

club sweaters – and all have redoubtable chops. Bushy, twirly, waxed or curled, their moustaches are eminently graspable. These self-confessed "facial hair fanatics" don't appear to do much other than "furry fraternising", which involves frequently raising their pint glasses with the toast: "To the last whisker!" Apparently, members do occasionally engage in charitable stunts such as finding out how many moustaches fit into a Mini. However, they do at least pay lip service to the Handlebar Club's Constitution, a copy of which is available to prospective members. For instance, anyone who lets their sideburns merge with their

moustache is fined. Even before Hitler and the Village People, moustaches had long been reviled as an unfashionable accoutrement. So these brave souls who risk gawping and mocking sniggers from passers-by deserve a little respect for their hirsute pluck.

● *Every two years, members enter the World Beard and Moustache Championships, where contestants battle it out in categories that include Dali, imperial, Hungarian, musketeer and freestyle.*

● **Contact details:** Members meet at 8pm on the first Friday of the month at the Windsor Castle pub, Crawford Place, W1. www.handlebarclub.co.uk



PHOTOGRAPHY BY STEPHANIE RIVOAL AND JORGE MONEDERO



THE COUPER COLLECTION

Moored between Battersea Bridge and Albert Bridge, a fleet of rusty barges hunkers down beside the gleaming new riverside apartment blocks. The boats may appear abandoned, but a small sign alerts visitors that this is the Couper Collection, an art gallery converted from the last surviving Thames barges, tethered on their original 18th century moorings. Accessible by a pontoon walkway of wooden bridges linking the barges, the Couper Collection is an

intriguing exploration of life on the Thames, featuring installations by artist-in-residence Max Couper. Hidden from view inside the bellies of the steel barges, Couper's mysterious artworks consist of fictional charts, blurred navigational maps, and large-scale installations inspired by their watery surroundings.

There's also a Sky Garden barge, its rusty womb lined with giant flowerpots, and a permanent collection of impressive children's art in the Museum of First Art. Special events include educational and ecological workshops

and the occasional live performance. Smaller vessels are home to plants and birdlife from the Thames, while two small opera barges make a dramatic setting for divas. Shrouded in mist or glinting in sunlight, this floating art gallery is one of London's most atmospheric venues.

● *Max Couper's collection of boats includes the last two barges built on the Thames, a pair of 1000-ton vessels for transporting wheat. London's barges,*

THE HORSE HOSPITAL

Buried away down a cobbled mews off tourist-trodden Russell Square, The Horse Hospital really was a sanctuary for sick horses back in its Victorian heyday. These days, it's a haven for avant-garde artists and disciples of all things underground. From the fuchsia hall, steep ramp with wooden slats originally intended to stop the horses slipping (beware – it's lethal in heels) leads up to a slightly spooky and faintly musty salon with a few battered seats. This is the self-styled Chamber of Pop Culture, where an audience of eccentrics enjoy the most eclectic line-up of art events in London, from cult films to performance poets, one-off musical installations and bizarre book launches. Anything goes – as long as it's defiantly anti-Establishment. In the small bar at the back, patrons knock back shots of absinthe and other fearsome brews. It's one of those rare places in London where you can easily slip into conversation with strangers. This sense of community, along with the spirit of

experimentation, is like a throwback to the Arts Labs of the '60s. Even the electric bar heaters date from another era. Often dubbed 'an alternative ICA', The Horse Hospital was founded in 1993 by stylist and costume designer Richard Burton, one of the pioneers of punk fashion along with Vivienne Westwood and Malcolm McLaren, whose boutique, World's End, was designed by Burton. The Horse Hospital opened with a splash thirteen years later with the first retrospective of Westwood's punk designs. Still run on a shoestring by a staff of three – Burton, curator James Hollands, and their vintage-clad associate Tai Shani – The Horse Hospital receives precious little public funding.

● *Fans can support the venue by sponsoring one of its 1384 cobblestones. Sponsors are ordained members of the 'exclusive' Grand Order of the Cobbles.*

● **Contact Details:** Herbrand Street and Colonnade, Bloomsbury WC1 020 7833 3644 www.thehorsehospital.com
● **Open Exhibitions Mon-Sat 12-6pm; for special events check website**
Admission Varies

a vital source of the city's wealth as a shipping centre, were made redundant by the invention of the shipping container in the 1960s and '70s, when thousands disappeared from the Thames.

● **Contact Details:** Riverside Walk, Hester Road, Battersea SW11 020 7738 1935 www.coupercollection.org.uk
Open Tues-Thurs 10am-4pm
Admission Free
● **Secret London, An Unusual Guide by Bill Nash and Rachel Howard (Jonglez) £10.99** ■