

J.L. Butler's Secret London

The setting for this novel – Middle Temple, one of the magical Inns of Court – almost came before the plot. Perhaps because I trained as a lawyer before I switched careers to journalism, I have always gravitated to this magical spot, which is sandwiched between Fleet Street and the River Thames. A warren of cloisters, gas-lit alleyways and barrister's chambers, housed in grand redbrick offices, it is off the beaten track for tourists – in fact, it is a hidden, unvisited spot for most Londoners. You really do feel as if you are stepping back through time when you enter through the black door on Fleet Street or through the dark, winding Deveraux Court. Next to Middle Temple is the also beautiful Inner Temple and the historic Temple Church which has links to the Knights Templar and was featured in the film *The Da Vinci Code*. The centrepiece of Middle Temple is Fountain Court with its shady fountain and view of the Elizabethan Middle Temple Hall. With some planning, non-barristers, you can even have lunch here.

As a novelist, I spent a lot of time walking around London, looking for locations or general inspiration. I always love stumbling across a quiet garden or hidden architectural treasures. London has thousands of well-known attractions, but I like to think of these less famous bits as Secret London. Whether you want a clandestine assignation, or just a tranquil spot to drink your coffee, here's some I recommend.

Mount Street Gardens

Tucked away just behind Goyard and Christian Louboutin (this is a coincidence, I promise you) on Mayfair's premier shopping street, this is a public version of those private gardens you see in the middle of London's most chi-chi residential areas. Remember when Hugh Grant boosted Julia Roberts into that garden in *Notting Hill*? Just like that. Without the locked iron gates.

Petersham Nurseries

There is now an urban version in Covent Garden, but it's worth making the trip out to the mothership in Richmond. Here, one of the most inventive high-end restaurants in the capital is hidden in a shabby chic greenhouse surrounded by flowers and plants (yes, it is a real nursery) with a shop so stylish it'll give anyone green fingers.

Isabella Plantation

A garden within a garden in the heart of London's wildest park, the Isabella is a glorious explosion of colour in spring when the Azalea bushes are in bloom. The rest of the year this Richmond Park secret is a zen-like oasis filled with lily-pad covered ponds and crunchy paths winding through the trees.

The Victoria and Albert National Art Library

Grand, historic and a wonderful hushed place to sit and read, most people don't realise this stunning room (wooden benches, green lamps and a wrought iron balcony) is open to the public. Ideal place to research your thesis on Titian – or just imagine you are!

Postman's Park

A quirky green space near St. Pauls, you may remember the park from the film *Closer*; no spoilers, but the walls are covered with plaques recalling heroic deeds in London such as daring rescues from fires. Utterly fascinating.

Strand Station

Only available by appointment on special occasions, the Strand is one of London's 'ghost stations,' an underground stop that has been closed since the 90s. Visiting it is like stepping back into the 1940s, with all the original tiling and wooden phone booths in the lobby. Super atmospheric. Oh, and *Sherlock* was filmed here.

Stanley Picker House

A modernist glass and steel art-filled masterpiece built into the side of a hill in South West London, the Picker House is so secret, it's hardly ever open, which makes it all the more intriguing – and if you like modern abstract sculpture, you won't want to leave the garden.

Clink Street

A narrow Dickensian street that forms part of a magical walk along the south bank of the Thames, with Tate Modern at the North end and the Golden Hind (Sir Francis Drake's pirate ship) at the other. In between you'll find Clink Street, home of the Clink Prison Museum, which was built on the site of the grisly Clink prison. While you are in this part of town, make time for Borough Market, full of dozens of delicious food stalls, including my favourite, Bread Ahead, home of the famous Bread Ahead custard doughnut.

Sky Garden

As the name suggests, a garden in the sky. 35 floors up above the city, it's a weird but wonderful public park with 360 views of London – and unlike the London Eye, it has chic restaurants and no long queues of exchange students. It's at 20 Fenchurch St. (the walkie-talkie building) and although it's free to drop in, book tickets as early as you can.

Highgate Cemetery

My next novel *Alone* is set a stone's throw from these glorious Victorian burial gardens (one of London's 'magnificent seven'.) The astonishing West Cemetery is particularly worth a mention – it can only be seen by appointment, and the vaults and statues are beautifully overgrown with moss and Ivy which make it even more haunting and atmospheric. The tombs in the Circle of Lebanon will give you poetic shivers – it's also the last resting place of tragic pre-Raphaelite muse Lizzie Siddal. And it's haunted by a vampire. Google it!