NORTHERN HEIGHTS CIRCUIT

London's open air museum : buildings, famous people, nature, social history

Section 4 : South End Green to Golders Hill Park

Theme : A wilderness that engaged the passions of the earliest environmental campaigners

Highlights : Heathlands and soggy bottoms conserving a variety of ecological habitats

Prepared by The Highgate Society, in partnership with the City of London and Camden Council.

A : Planning your trip:

The walk starts at the 24 bus terminus at South End Green and ends at the cafe in Golders Hill Park. Allow at least an hour for the 2.2 mile (3.5 km) walk.

Almost the entire walk is across Hampstead Heath and can be quite muddy in places. Stout shoes are recommended.

This section of the Northern Heights Circuit will be enjoyed by people who like a vigorous walk in the open air. It is spectacular in late October when the leaves turn. Children who enjoy an active walk will find plenty to interest them.

For a longer walk you could continue beyond Golders Hill Park using section five of the Northern Heights Circuit. You could go as far as Kenwood House which, like Golders Hill Park, lies a stone's throw from the 102 bus route linking Archway and Golders Green Underground stations.

It would be equally enjoyable to walk this section in the reverse direction.

Reaching South End Green :

*South End Green is the terminus of the 24 bus route. The 24 runs every 7 minutes from **Pimlico** via Victoria mainline station, Trafalgar Square, Tottenham Court Road, Warren Street and **Camden Town** Underground station (20 minutes). It can also be reached using the C11 bus from stop "E" outside **Archway** Underground station.*

Journey time from Oxford Circus should be about 35 minutes.

Returning from Golders Hill Park :

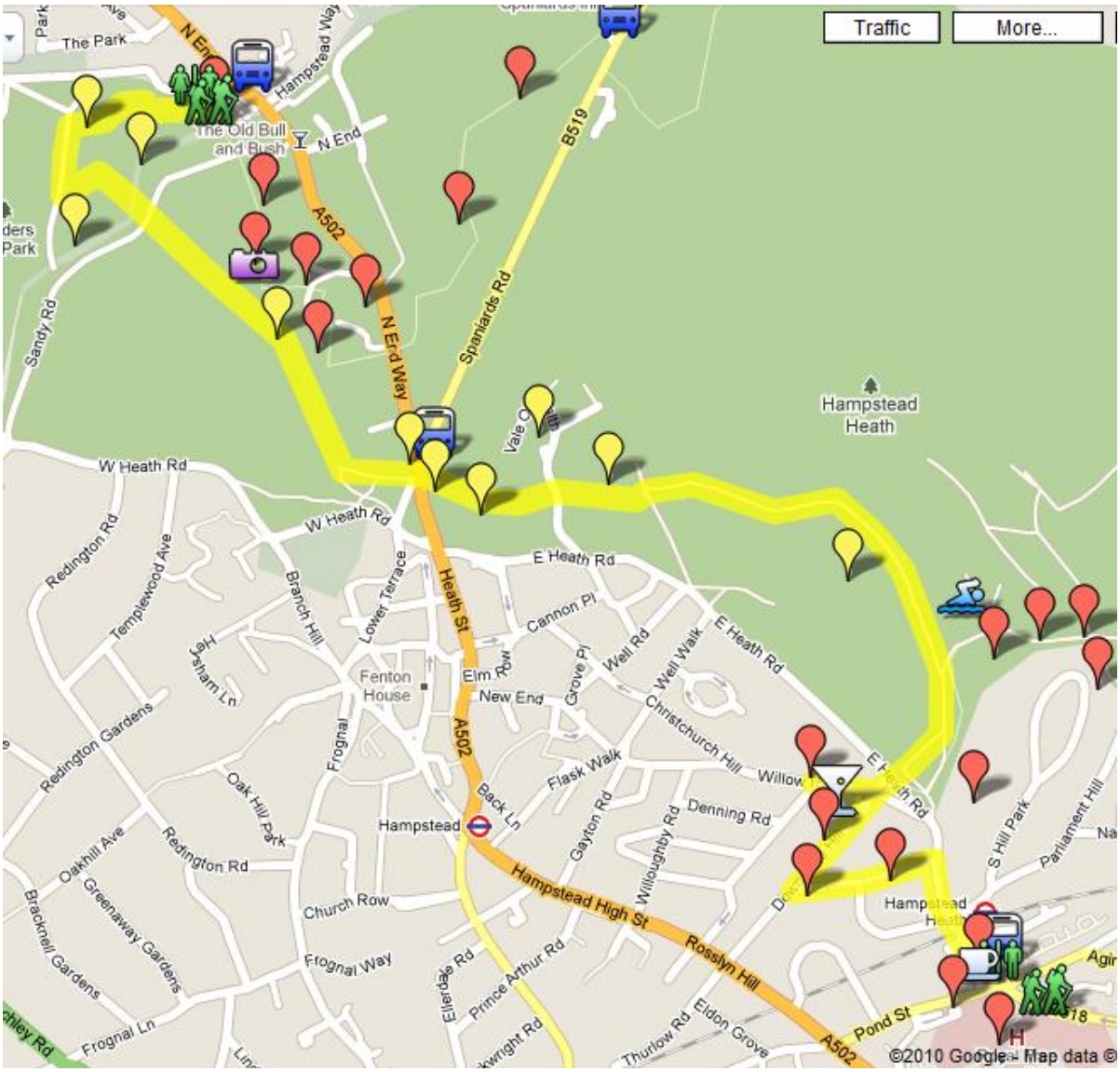
*Return from **Golders Hill Park** using bus 210 or 246, destinations **Brent Cross** or **Golders Green**, to **Golders Green** Underground station, three minutes, two stops. Golders Green Underground station is on the **Edgware** branch of the Northern Line*

Facilities

At the start of the walk in South End Green there are many cafes and restaurants (**Le Pain Quotidien, Starbucks, Hampstead Tea Rooms, Dominique**) and a pub with a beer garden (**The Garden Gate**). There are no further refreshment points until you reach the cafe at **Golders Hill Park** at the end of the section.

There are public toilets at South End Green, on Hampstead Heath midway along the walk and at Golders Hill Park Cafe.

B : The route :



C : The walk :

401 : This section starts at the terminus of the 24 bus route at **South End Green**. The spacious bus stand was designed as a turning point at the end of a horse drawn **tram route** which reached South End Green in 1887.

402 : The **public toilets**, which were opened for the benefit of passengers in 1897, are worthy of a visit if only in their capacity as a listed building.

403 : First settled in the 16th century, South End Green was a peaceful and agreeable hamlet until the arrival of the railway. The **Hampstead Heath Overground** station lies on the route from Stratford to Richmond.

404 : When it was opened in 1867 it brought large numbers of East Enders to South End Green from where they would enjoy **donkey rides** on Hampstead Heath.

Representation of Hampstead Heath in "Punch", 1860

405 : Whereas the number of pubs in Highgate is explained by the requirements of travelling drovers (section one), the number of eateries in South End Green reflects the size of the crowds that used to visit Hampstead Heath on public holidays. Today it is difficult to imagine that the settlement was one of the first mass **tourist destinations**, fulfilling a similar function for East Enders as Blackpool did for Northerners and Brighton for South Londoners.

406 : Such was the level of drinking among these visitors that in 1889 a local benefactor, **Anne Crump**, presented the community with a drinking fountain "to help stop intemperance and vice". This fountain is now the main feature of the village green.

407 : Meanwhile in 1876 the maltreatment of donkeys used to give rides to tourists contributed to the formation of a Hampstead branch of the **Royal Society for the Protection of Cruelty to Animals.**

The drinking fountain

408 : Just as Pond Square in Highgate bears testimony to a now filled-in village pond, so South End Green's Pond Street, which leads from the terminus of the No 24 bus up past the Royal Free Hospital towards Hampstead Town, commemorates the **pond** that used to stand where the buses now park.

South End Green pond, 1828

409 : "Le Pain Quotidien" on the corner of Pond Street and South End Road replaced a bookshop at which **George Orwell** (1903-1950) once worked. He lodged next door with the proprietor.

410 : The first part of the walk retraces the last part of section three of the Northern Heights Circuit, Parliament Hill Fields to South End Green. Walk along the left side of **South End Road** past Hampstead Heath Overground station and various shops and restaurants. **Daunt Books** stocks local guides. Beyond the bookshop turn left into **Keats Grove**, until 1910 known as John Street.

411 : Shortly on your left is the house, previously known as **Wentworth Place**, which between 1818 and 1829 was the home of the romantic poet **John Keats**. The building is now a **museum** dedicated to his life and to poetry in general. Opening hours are from 1-5pm, Tuesday to Sunday (Easter to the 31st October) and 1-5pm Friday to Sunday (31st October to Easter).

http://www.keatshouse.cityoflondon.gov.uk/

Keats House

The **Romantic** movement, on which Keats was a major influence, reacted against the 18th century Enlightenment's reliance on scientific enquiry and rational thought. Romantic writers such as Keats re-asserted the importance of emotion, passion, and the natural world.

412 : A renewed interest in the aesthetics and ethos of the medieval period resulted in the emergence of a **Gothic revival** architectural style which dominated London architecture

from the early 19th century until the arrival of modernism in the 1930s.

413 : Wentworth Place dates from 1814. In 1920 it was threatened with **demolition** to make way for a block of flats. A campaign to purchase it for use as a memorial museum was successful, thanks to many generous donations from the United States. It was opened to the public in 1925.

414 : A building adjacent to it is a **local library**. Listed as grade one, the main building is maintained by the City of London.

415 : Quite apart from its association with Keats, Downshire Hill and Keats Grove are virtually unrivalled in terms of literary and artistic associations. The poet and critic **Edith Sitwell** (1887-1964) lived in Keats Grove, as did the playwright **Alan Ayckbourn** (born 1939) at No 11A and **Sarah**, daughter of Coleridge, who would have crossed the Heath from Highgate to visit her. The Liberal Prime Minister **Herbert Asquith** (1852-1931) lived at No 12.

Meanwhile on **Downshire Hill** the painter **John Constable** lived for a while at Nos 25/26. No 21 bears a plaque to the art expert **Roland Penrose** (1900-1984), biographer of Picasso and a leader of the Artists Refugee Committee which assisted refugees from Germany in the 1930s and whose headquarters were at No 47. The first minister of St John's Church, the classical scholar **William Harness**, was a close friend of the poet Byron.

416 : At the top of Keats Grove, at the junction with Downshire Hill, stands the distinctive grade one listed church of **St John's, Downshire Hill.** http://www.sjdh.org Most churches built to serve London's burgeoning suburban congregations were built in a style that mimicked that of a medieval church. St Anne's, which you may have passed earlier, is an example, as is St Michael's Highgate, whose spire you see from Kite Hill. By contrast St John's was designed in the **classical** style typical of 17th and 18th churches built in central London. With its wooden weather boarding and its bell tower it would not look of out of place in New England.

Bell tower of St John's, Downshire Hill

417 : St John's is also unusual in that it does not administer to a local parish. Ordinarily the Church of England would finance new churches to serve recently arrived residents in newly created suburban parishes. By contrast St John's was funded by **private subscription** and it continues to operate outside the normal administrative structures of the Church of England.

The church was extensively restored in 2004.

418 : Downshire Hill was developed in 1817. In contrast to the regularity of Georgian house fronts, the stucco (ie white plastered) **Regency villas** that line the road are each built to a unique design, notwithstanding the pleasing harmony of the whole. Features of particular interest on many of the houses are the patterns of the **iron grilles** behind the glazing above the front doors.

Decorative door designs in Downshire Hill

Such are the vagaries of taste that these houses were relatively poorly regarded in the 19th century and Downshire Hill only recovered its status as a prime residential area in the 1930s.

419 : The **Freemasons' Arms**, a gastro-pub at the foot of Downshire Hill, is notable for having London's last skittles alley in its basement.

420 : Just beyond the Freemasons' Arms turn left into **Willow Road**. You could be forgiven for overlooking the modernist block of three houses immediately on your left, **1-3 Willow Road**. Their Hungarian born architect **Erno Goldfinger** (1902-1987) lived with his family at No 2. Previously he was a resident of Highpoint in Highgate North Road, described in section one.

Today the appearance of this block is almost commonplace. When it was built in 1939 it defied almost all architectural conventions. It is one of the earliest houses to use **reinforced concrete**. Its modernist style eschews the Gothic and classical detail characteristic of earlier building styles, particularly in Hampstead.

421 : One local resident offended by the demolition of the cottages which 1-3 Willow Road replaced was **Ian Fleming** who reacted by naming the James Bond adversary and villain "Auric Goldfinger". Goldfinger considered litigation.

1-3 Willow Road

2 Willow Road has been acquired for the nation by the **National Trust** and is its first "modernist" property. Inside visitors can see the Goldfingers' collection of modern art, including work by **Henry Moore**, some personal possessions and characteristic modern furniture during guided tours. For opening times see :
http://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/main/w-vh/w-visits/w-findaplace/w-2willowroad/w-2willowroad-goldfinger.htm

422 : Across the road from 1-3 Willow Road is a children's **adventure playground**.

423 : Below the playground is a small green hut, now a ranger's office for the City of London which administers the Heath. This hut was built to bring an end to the chaotic scenes on summer holidays as up to a hundred owners of previously **unlicenced donkeys** competed for visitors' custom. There is a 19th century **cattle drinking trough** a hundred yards up East Heath Road.

424 : Cross East Heath Road and make your way along the contour of the hill towards the lower end of the lowest of three expanses of water, the **Hampstead Ponds**. They were dug in 1700 by The **Hampstead Water Company**, one of the first instances of a private company specialising in "infrastructure", in this case the supply of water to London's growing population.

425 : A founding director of the company was **William Paterson** (1658-1719), the founder of the Bank of England. The ponds replaced a malarial swamp.

426 : The ponds form part of the course of one of two arms of the **River Fleet**, a tributary which joins the Thames at Blackfriars. The Fleet gives its name both to Fleet Street, for many years the home of Britain's newspaper publishers and a collective term used to refer to the British press, and Fleet Road, the main road south from South End Green.

The name "Fleet" aptly describes the fast flowing character of this river which drops over 400 feet in just five miles. Its fast flow keeps its water clean and clear which has made it an attractive source of water for supplying the needs of the City of London.

427 : At the bottom end of the lowest pond, the first you reach, children may enjoy a good view of the water fowl from a gated and fenced **viewing platform** which overlooks the pond.

Coots, mallard, black-headed gulls and Canada geese at the bird viewing enclosure

428 : The villas of **South Hill Park** on the opposite side the ponds enjoy magnificent views over the Heath as well as the ponds. This has led to the installation of picture windows, sun lounges and attic studios as though the houses looked out to sea.

Owners of these late 19th century homes enjoy magnificent views across Hampstead Ponds.

429 : Today a major source of conflict arises as householders attempt to further enlarge their homes with **basements**, a practice that is particularly disruptive for their neighbours. Because of the heavy London clay on which many of these houses stand, basements often have a particularly adverse structural affect on other properties not least because they disturb existing drainage patterns.

430 : Continue along the path beside the ponds. They form a series, similar in character to the Highgate Ponds which you may have seen during section three of the walk. These are fed by the other branch of the River Fleet.

431 : Just before the causeway between the mixed bathing pond to the left and the No 2 pond to the right, strike off the main path and follow a **gravel pathway** up the hill keeping the bushes to your right.

432 : The view to the left is dominated by the bulk of the **Royal Free Hospital**. Founded in 1828, it re-located to its present site in 1978. Employing 7,000 staff, it is one of London's leading teaching hospitals.

433 : The car park which you can see beside **East Heath Road** is the site of a **fairground**, set out in 1865, which was just one of the entertainments that attracted 19th century day trippers to the Heath.

434 : The path you are on is one of many well worn tracks which crisscross what has traditionally been used as **common land**.
Such land provided a vital resource in medieval times for grazing animals, "gathering winter fuel" (as in the Christmas Carol) and cutting turf. Such commons were particularly frequent in areas with sandy, acidic soil which were unsuitable for arable farming. The absence of trees and bushes to your left illustrates the impact on the environment of **heavy trampling** by human beings.

435 : On your left patches of bright green grass and yellow iris indicate the location of **boggy springs** caused by the juxtaposition of the sandy Bagshot Beds and the impermeable London Clay.

Yellow Iris

436 : The winding path continues along a steeper sloping section of short grass on thin sandy soil . The irregularities of such landscapes are common in the rural scenes depicted by both classical and romantic painters.

437 : To your right the thickets of bushes and low trees along the valley bottom provide an important habitat for birds and insects. When this part of the Heath was purchased for the nation in 1889, it was expressly stated that its natural state should be retained. This was one of the first instances of public open space being maintained as a "**wilderness**" area rather than as a formal park, as was the case in the 18th century and in the manner of the Kenwood Estate which features in sections five and one.

438 : The path meets what gives the appearance of once having been a proper road at the valley bottom, built by London County Council as a route linking Hampstead and Highgate. The campaign to halt this development was another victory for the environmental groups which predated the **Heath and Hampstead Society**, currently the leading environmental group on this side of the Heath.

439 : The road to the left enters Hampstead at **Well Walk**. In the 18th century the iron salts in the waters of its wells enhanced Hampstead's reputation as a **therapeutic** centre, much as its celebrated psychotherapists do today.

440 : Hampstead's water was so much cleaner and harder than that of the City of London's that the village thrived as a centre for **starching** and **laundering** the clothes of London's residents. The **gorse bushes** which covered the sandier parts of the heath were then used for airing and drying.

Area of botanical interest below Limes Avenue

441 : Cross the track and bear slightly to your right, taking care now to keep the valley on your left. Its clay river bottoms, sandy ridges and combination of north and south facing slopes, made the Heath an attractive location for many early **botanists**. The Society of Apothecaries visited the Heath regularly in the early 17th century in search of botanical specimens.

442 : The track quickly rises to a surprising prospect – a brick **viaduct** crossing a small ravine beyond a lake.

443 : Behind the viaduct you may be lucky enough to see a water rail.

The Viaduct

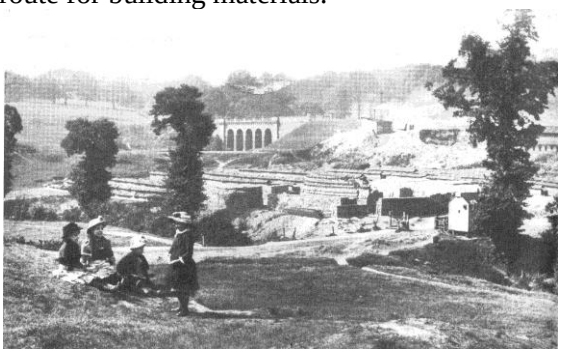
444 : The part of the Heath you have now entered is **East Heath**, the eastern section of the original **Hampstead Heath** – which has been extended over the years by the public purchase of the Kenwood Estate and the farmlands of Parliament Hill Fields.

445 : During the second half of the 19th century a bitter dispute arose over the entitlement of the owner of this common land to realise the potential **development value** of the land, both for minerals and speculative building.

The pathway across the ravine was laid out in the mid 1840s by **Sir Thomas Wilson** in preparation for this development. It continues downhill across the causeway between the Hampstead Ponds, ending on East Heath Road by the old fairground.

446 : The area to your left provided copious supplies of **sand** used for laying the bricks of what is now the Eurostar terminus at **St Pancras Station**. Thickets on the right contain land that was at one time leased out for the

manufacture of yellow stock bricks using deposits of London clay. Sir Thomas's roadway thus became an important supply route for building materials.



Brickfields by the viaduct, c 1880

447 : Continue to the left up the steep slope. The lack of vegetation is due to the **rabbits** that thrive in the sandy conditions. Then continue up hill along Sir Thomas's roadway up the hill through stands of mature woods.

Fruit and foliage of the wild service tree

448 : Just off the main path are two Wild Service trees. These rare trees seldom grow other than where there was once ancient woodland. Their fruit was at one time used as a remedy for colic and to flavour beer.

449 : Beyond a rustic building housing public toilets, to the left of the path is an example of an "**ice house**" dating from 1840. Ice houses were quite common before the advent of electric refrigeration and were situated near ponds and often in woods at some distance from housing. A brick-lined pit below a domed roof would be filled with layers of straw and ice.

The ice house

450 : Shortly afterwards the path opens up into flatter area of grass. During the Napoleonic wars this was used as a parade ground for the **Loyal Hampstead Association**.

451 : As the pathway opens out you reach an area used each spring as the site of a travelling **fairground**. To the left is an avenue of pine trees through which you can enjoy a most attractive view across the City.

View across London from above the Vale of Health

452 : Below you is one of a number of very ancient hamlets which developed across the Heath, the **Vale of Health**. Formerly known as Hatch Bottom, it was renamed when a swampy piece of land was drained and turned into a small lake in 1777.

The Vale of Health from its pond

453 : The Vale of Health was a favoured destination for the romantic poets of the early 19th century. This was due both to the wild and natural environment that encircled it and to it being the home between 1816 and 1821 of **Leigh Hunt** (1784-1859), an influential figure in the Romantic movement and friend of Byron, Shelley and Keats. **D H Lawrence** also lived here for a while.

454 : When the railway reached South End Green this peace of the Vale of Health was disturbed by **tea rooms** that exploited its newfound attraction as a destination for donkey rides.

455 : Nearby is the most extensive area of gorse on the Heath as well as some locations where the Heath's management have reintroduced **heather** in order to recreate a landscape more characteristic of the Heath's traditional appearance.

456 : This is the only place in London where, after a hundred year's absence, you can now see the **tube-web spider** (*Atypus affinis*). The spider is attracted by the rabbit-grazed grassland.

457 :Visible from this part of the walk is a **pound**, a listed building dating from 1787 in which stray or unauthorised animals were held until recovery.

458 : The path in due course reaches a summit close to **Heath House**, the highest house in inner London. It was for many years owned by the Quaker anti-slavery campaigner **Samuel Hoare**. He and his descendents were members of a banking company that still survives under Hoare's name.

459 : The weather-boarded **Jack Straw's Castle** is reached via a pedestrian crossing. There was no "Jack Straw", this being a generic name used to describe a farm worker. The current building dates only from 1962 but an inn has stood on this spot since the 16th century. The space around the pub was licensed for bowling in the 17th century. The novelist **Charles Dickens** is said to have read his manuscripts in the inn.

Jack Straw's Castle

460 : To your left is **Whitestone Pond**, at 440 feet the highest point in inner London. This pond was an important landmark on the road between Hampstead and **St Albans** and until recently had extensive views westwards as well as south-eastwards over London.

461 : In 2010 the pond and its surrounds were restored to its original shape by Camden Council and English Heritage in using granite and york stone. The ramp allows the pond to be used by the horses of the **Kings Troop** which from time to time ride here from their base in St John's Wood. The filtration system and reed bed keep the water clean and prevent the growth of algae.

Whitestone Pond, 2010

462 : You might wonder why major coaching routes should climb the two highest points in inner London, Whitestone Pond and Highgate

Village, rather than detour round them. By keeping to **watersheds** these routes reduced the need to cross streams and boggy ravines. Equally important in the days before highway engineering, the risk of carriages **toppling over** was less on routes that avoided running along the sides of hills.

463 : As late as the 17th century the crossing of this section of the Heath could be made hazardous by **highway robbers**. Close to the current flagstaff was a gibbet on which the bodies of robbers were hung as a deterrent.

464 : In the 16th century, when views were less impeded by trees and houses, the site was an important link in a network of **beacons** used for giving advance warning of enemy attack, for example by the **Spanish Armada** during the Anglo-Spanish War in the 16th century. The beacon was located where the flagstaff now stands.

465 : The distant views and good visibility attracted the painter **John Constable** who lived in a cottage overlooking Whitestone Pond in 1819. Constable used this part of the Heath as a setting for many of his most memorable paintings, notably westwards to **Harrow on the Hill**. Its exposure to wild weather and openness to the clouds appealed particularly to the Romantic sensibility.

View to the west of Hampstead Heath (from near Whitestone Pond) by John Constable, ca 1821

466 : From the flagstaff on Hampstead Heath, keeping Jack Straw's Castle on your right, take a small path between dense overgrowth down a short incline and then bear right into what is known as the **West Heath**.

467 : Continue along this path through mature mixed woodland which is particularly colourful in autumn beneath. Brambles and mossy hollows below provide a habitat for rabbits and foxes. **Silver birch** and **holly** are particularly common due to the acidic soil, much of which is very poorly drained.

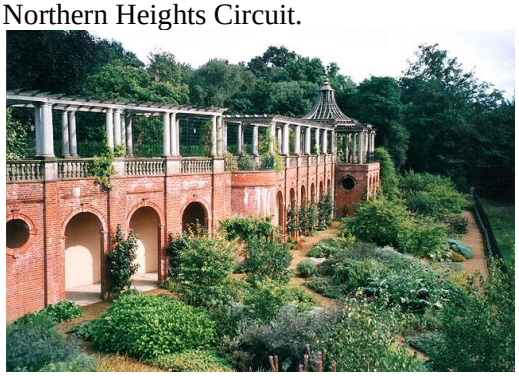
468 : Look or listen out here for one of the three **woodpecker** species found on the Heath.

West Heath

469 : In due course you will see, rising on your right, what initially appear to be the ramparts of a fortification, with visitors strolling along its upper parts. This is the largest and most elaborate example of a **pergola**, a horizontal trellis supported on posts that carries climbing plants and may be used as a covered walk.

Pergolas were popular in the late 19th century as a place for the rich to take a stroll amid rambling climbing plants and the scent of roses. Work on this particular one was commenced in 1906.

To walk along the pergola you will need to continue from the end of this section to what is one of the highlights of section five of the Northern Heights Circuit.



The Pergola, West Heath

470 : Winding gradually downwards along this path in due course you reach gates through which you can enter **Golders Hill Park**, originally the grounds of a 18th century country estate which was purchased on the death of Queen Victoria's surgeon in 1898. It is now maintained by the City of London. From this entrance you will enjoy distant views to the west and north-west of London, across **Golders Green, Hendon** and **Mill Hill.**

From here on dogs should be kept on leads.

471 : To your left is an enclosure containing **fallow deer**. Walking round this enclosure to the left brings you to a recently renovated **children's zoo** and aviary and an **adventure playground** in a pleasant setting.

The water garden at Golders Hill Park

472 : From the zoo walk back along the contour of the hillside, crossing an **ornamental stream** via a hump backed bridge until you come to a **water garden** and formal **flower gardens**. Continue up the hill until you come to the Golders Hill Park Cafe and its terrace.

473 : Shortly above the cafe at a point which is now used as a car park for the disabled is the site of the former **Golders Hill House**, destroyed by a bomb in 1941.

Golders Hill Park

474 : After refreshments you may want to continue along the next section of the North London Circuit, via the pergola, as far as **Kenwood House.** To continue on this section take the path immediately in front of the cafe terrace. It takes you up the hill to a gate between a line of trees.

To return from the cafe to central London by public transport, keep to the left at the entrance to the cafe up the path until, in fifty yards, you reach the entrance gates on **North End Way**.

On the left is a stop from which you can take a 102 bus (destination **Brent Cross**) or a 268 bus (destination **Golders Green Station**) to the entrance to Golders Hill Underground station on the **Edgware** branch of the Northern line, three minutes, two stops.

Alternatively, from the stop across the road you can take a 102 bus (destination **Finsbury Park**) every eight minutes as far as **Archway** Underground station, on the **High Barnet** branch of the Northern Line, 23 minutes, 14 stops. This stop is also used by the 268 bus (destination **Finchley Road**) which runs every 12 minutes to **Hampstead** Underground Station, on the **Edgware** branch of the Northern Line, six minutes, three stops.

Further information:

Other sections of the Northern Heights Circuit can be downloaded from the website of the Highgate Society

www.highgatesociety.com

More detailed information about Hampstead and Hampstead Heath can be found in:

Denford, Stephen, *The Hampstead Book – The A-Z of its History and People*, 2009
Farmer, Alan, *Hampstead Heath*, 1984
McDowall, David, and Wolton, **Deborah,** *The Walkers Guide to Hampstead Heath*, 2006

Copyright Highgate Society 2011