

## Walk Your Neighbourhood Skull this Halloween

by Andy Howlett

*This is a walk recipe for Halloween night. It is suitable for both solo walkers and groups. The basic concept was devised by Fiona, Andy and Pete of Walkspace, a West Midlands walking-art co-operative. In October 2020 the first walk took place in Stirchley, south Birmingham, under a full moon. “Walking the Stirchley Skull” has since become a popular Halloween tradition. Follow these steps to create your own spooky neighbourhood skull walk. Feel free to improvise and add your own ingredients.*

- Take a map of your local area and draw or overlay a simple skull shape onto it. The outline of the skull will form the route of your walk. Pick a start point, wait for nightfall, and go there.
- Decide whether you want to walk the skull clockwise or “widdershins”. Widdershins is an old term meaning “against the way”, or to travel in the opposite direction to the sun’s course. This can be an effective way of invoking darker energies, but results are unpredictable so for first-timers we recommend walking clockwise.
- Don’t worry about sticking religiously to the course of the skull. There’s no need to hop fences, crash through hedges or wade through water. The magic will still work if you must deviate slightly to use approved pedestrian routes. In Stirchley we make use of cut-throughs, alleyways and gullies to pass freely between realms: residential, commercial, recreational, municipal. What affordances does your neighbourhood offer?

- Halloween has its roots in the old Celtic festival of Samhain (pronounced “sow-wen”) which marked the end of harvest and the beginning of the dark half of the year. As you walk, pay attention to the subtle transformations brought by seasonal change: the first gales of winter echoing a banshee’s cry, the spectral figures created in a breath, flood waters forming portals to mirror worlds. Don’t expect the weather to “behave” for you, treat it as a collaborator, not an adversary.
- On this night the veil between our world and the spirit world is at its thinnest. Look out for visitors from the Otherside: spirits, ghosts, demons. Beyond the obvious carved pumpkins and plastic skeletons, what other apparitions and hauntings can you detect? Faces in the brickwork of an old school. A “ghost sign” advertising a long dead business. A passing cloud shaped like a witch on a broomstick. Buildings can be ghosts too: on our Stirchley Skull walk we pass the site of a vanished farmhouse and a residential street with a missing number 13.
- Turn your walk into an anatomy lesson: when you reach the point on the skull where the ear would be, tune in to the soundscape of the night by walking in silence. When you come to the mouth why not get out some tasty treats? What activities might you perform at the crown? Or the temple? Sometimes the landscape itself might offer something up: on the western side of the Stirchley Skull’s jaw we were delighted to find a dental laboratory.
- The walk ends when you arrive back at your starting point. Before you retire to the pub or go home, consider the transformation that has been enacted tonight. Stand for a moment with the ghost of your former self. These streets will never look at you in the same way again.