



Hidden Histories

a book by

Central District Alliance



The CDA Footprint



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Introduction

We warmly welcome you to explore the rich culture and history of central London's Bloomsbury, St Giles, Holborn, Farringdon and Clerkenwell neighbourhoods. As your local business group, Central District Alliance strives to showcase the vibrant patchwork of communities making up the heart of this area.

Within these pages, you will discover a diverse array of neighbourhoods, each with its own fascinating story to tell.

In quaint Clerkenwell, chefs' whites hang in family-run Italian delis, and original medieval crypts hide beneath the surfaces of a sleek, modern design district where you can run your hand over richly-grained, centuries-old wood on showroom floors.

Meanwhile, in bustling Holborn the clink of after-work pint glasses echoes off Victorian pub walls and there are centuries of legal history to uncover in the area's Inns of Court. In-between, independent shops and cosmopolitan eateries beckon you to slow down and enjoy the neighbourhood's unique charm.





Drop into Hatton Garden, where diamonds glitter from specialist jewellers' safes. Or meander through the historic alleys of Saffron Hill, where colourful street art scrawls across centuries-old brickwork. We enlisted Victor Keegan, a distinguished writer on London history, to share insider stories revealing our neighbourhoods' living history. His articles gathered here will lead you to gems like the historic St John's Gate, where monks once cared for pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem and was later home to the first ever monthly magazine; to the original location of Thomas Coram's famous Foundling Hospital; to remnants of London's once gigantic gin industry; and to the Titanic connections of a Bloomsbury hotel.

We would like to thank journalist Dave Hill, editor and publisher of OnLondon.co.uk, who has helped us develop the book, designers Rob Coumbe and Alex Graves of Hutch Agency, and illustrator Dan Brown.

As you unfold the illustrated map inside this guidebook, let the stories capture your imagination about the generations of Londoners who have walked these streets over the centuries. We hope you will explore and fall in love with these places, as we have, and feel connected to the communities we cherish.

From all of us at CDA, welcome!

Debbie Akehurst
CEO of Central District Alliance and Hatton Garden BIDs

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of Yorke
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hospital
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Real old
Holborn
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Holborn has distinctive characteristics as a place, even though it often gets mixed in with areas around it or associated mostly with its Tube stations and places of work.

It doesn't have a really famous landmark, unless you count Holborn Viaduct, which is stretching it a bit. It doesn't really have a high street either – although High Holborn runs through the middle, it's very wide and there aren't many ordinary high street shops.

Yet Holborn has its own history, its own architecture and, most of all, a very special mix of people.

There are more communities in Holborn than is often realised. It's a real mish-mash and very international. We are close to central London, yet residents often talk about parts of Holborn having a village feel, especially north of Theobolds Road.

There are affluent people, a big student population because of UCL, SOAS and King's College, and there are many pockets of social housing too.

Holborn Community Association is an anchor organisation that runs three community centres. We also do a lot of outreach projects on the local estates. Altogether, we work with about 2,200 people a year and it's all focused on reducing social isolation, having fun and improving health – physical health, mental health and general wellbeing.

“There are more communities in Holborn than is often realised.”

Since the pandemic, those things have deteriorated quite a lot.

Ask me what I like most about the communities here and I think I would say it is their spirit. It can be a bit oppositional and rebellious. When you look back at Holborn's history, especially a place like Red Lion Square, it's always been there. There's still that undercurrent today.

Paul Crozier
Director, Holborn Community Association



Cittie of Yorke

Taverns are said to have occupied the site since 1430, though a lot has changed above and below ground since then.

Words by Vic Keegan



T

he sign above the Cittie of Yorke in High Holborn says it all: “Established as the site of a public house in 1430.” This claim and the old fashioned lettering in which it is written immediately pull you inside. And you are not disappointed. After passing through a small but comfy snug, where there was once a small garden, you enter the cathedral of taverns.

The pub claims to have the longest bar in London and it is probably the tallest as well, flanked on one sidewall by giant vats, each holding up to 1,100 gallons, and on the other by a discreet chain of cubicles where lawyers from the nearby Inns of Court – and others with different motives – can have private conversations. Camra, the real ale organisation, calls it “a truly remarkable pub” providing “a self-conscious, romantic evocation of an Olde England”.

There are similar evocations nearby. The pub stands immediately next door to the entrance to Gray’s Inn, where at 7:50 pm every day, a curfew bell is sounded to warn inhabitants to put out their fires, just as in medieval times. Across the road, the site of today’s Southampton Buildings was previously occupied by Southampton House, where lived the family of Thomas Wriothesley, Earl of Southampton, to whom Shakespeare is said to have dedicated many of his sonnets. Its grounds were later a location for one of the ring of forts that Parliament built around London as protection against a feared invasion by Charles I’s army.

The pub has been called the Cittie of Yorke only since the early 1980s, following its purchase by its present owner, the Samuel Smith chain. The name is taken from a long-demolished 16th century pub which was situated on the other side of the road in Staple Inn. It was previously called Henekey’s Long Bar: Dylan Thomas wrote an instant poem during a visit to it in 1951. It has had other names in the past, such as The Queen’s Head.

“The pub claims to have the longest bar in London.”

Despite its appearance of being much older, nearly all the current building dates from 1923-24. Nonetheless, today's pub has a cellar dating back at least to the 1600s that is today a working bar, and its statement about 1430 is an assertion of being among the oldest tavern locations in London.

Of course, other pubs make such claims, with declared origins within a few years of each other. The Guinea in Mayfair says it has been an inn since 1423, though the present building only (only?) goes back to 1720. The Old Red Lion in St John Street, not far from the Cittie of Yorke, says it can trace its birth back to 1415 and has done some impressive research to back that up.

There are plenty of other pubs, from the Hoop and Grapes at Aldgate to the George in Borough Market, that also have some grounds for saying they are among London's oldest. Does a pub have to have remnants of the original building to qualify as one of the oldest, a continuous record of occupation or the same name, or is being on the same site all that matters?

This fascinating question might have to be resolved by a linguistic philosopher rather than a historian or archaeologist, because all contenders have experienced huge changes, major reconstructions and been put to multiple uses. For example, during the 17th Century, the Cittie of Yorke's predecessor building hosted a coffee shop. The debate rolls on.



If retaining key parts of the original building is a requirement, there is – or was until recently – a candidate only a few hundred yards from the Cittie of Yorke, immediately on the left after passing Holborn Viaduct bridge. There, Museum of London archaeologists unearthed substantial remains of the Three Tuns pub which had its own micro-brewery and might, in a more enlightened age, have been preserved and rebuilt. Instead, it is now buried under a new office block.

Maybe what matters in the end is whether the pub looks the part, has the atmosphere and is imbued with memories and history. The Cittie of Yorke meets all those requirements.



Foundling hospital

Before it moved into its own building in Bloomsbury, Thomas Coram's philanthropic refuge for abandoned children had a temporary home nearby.

Words by **Vic Keegan**

I

n 1719, a man went to live in the maritime village of Rotherhithe by the Thames to enjoy a well-earned retirement after a career as a shipwright, running his own business in the new colony of America. Although the business was successful for most of its time, in the end it left him poor. But this was no ordinary man. It was Thomas Coram, one of the most extraordinary people in Georgian England.

On his frequent walks around London, Coram was stunned by the number of dead and dying babies, mainly illegitimate, he saw abandoned – can you believe it? – in the streets and on dust heaps. Horrifying statistics indicated that in crowded workhouses babies aged under two years died at a rate of almost 99 per cent. They were described as “Britain’s dying rooms”. One report suggested that in Westminster Parish only one in 500 foundlings survived.

It is a sobering thought that at a time when Britain was treating slaves inhumanly abroad it was also allowing its own unwanted children to die on the streets of its capital. Although he was 54 years old – a good age in those days – Coram decided to do something about it. And he did. Thanks to his untiring efforts and refusal to take “no” for an answer, the Foundling Hospital became what must have been the most successful charity in the country.



The Hospital was eventually built in Bloomsbury at Lamb’s Conduit Field, on the spot now called Coram’s Fields. This followed unsuccessful efforts to get it located in Montagu House, where the British Museum is today. What is less well known is that Bloomsbury is not where the institution was originally based.

During its first and formative years it was located in Hatton Garden – before it became an international centre for gems – in a dwelling belonging to Sir Fisher Trench, the MP for Southwark.

Tench had grown enormously rich on a range of activities including, it has to be said, the slave trade (though the Foundling Hospital was not in any way connected). William Hogarth's famous painting of Coram was presented to the Hospital while it was based at this temporary home.

Gillian Wagner says in her biography of Coram that the Hatton hospital consisted of four rooms, with two staircases to the second floor and a yard at the back, though its exact location is still a bit of a puzzle. A document in the London Metropolitan Archives recording the arrangement says it was in Hatton Street in Hatton Garden, but Hatton Street does not appear on a contemporary map. Maybe in those days it referred to the street we call Hatton Garden today, while Hatton Garden may have been the name for the area as a whole.

There is also a contemporary reference to it being “next to the charity house in Hatton Garden”, which probably refers to St Andrew's charity school, supposedly designed by Christopher Wren. The school's facade can still be seen in Hatton Garden, though the building behind it has been reconstructed as offices.

Coram's attempts to raise funds for his project were turned down successively by the government, various institutions and a number of prosperous men. He then had the bright idea of seeking the help of aristocratic women instead, and soon made such a success of it that the men felt obliged to follow.

By 1737, this humble man had signed up dozens of dukes and earls plus the Privy Council and even Prime Minister Sir Robert Walpole. Coram won them over by walking around London from house to house to secure their signatures. It was a shining example of the golden years of philanthropy when privileged people, sometimes with ill-earned money, filled the social gap that governments recoiled from.

Sadly, Coram fell out with his fellow governors, but he retained a passion for the hospital – which, in 1935, moved to Berkhamsted in Hertfordshire – until his death in March 1751. It would never have existed without him, and for well over 100 years it was the only institution in London that took care of illegitimate children. Coram's tomb is at St Andrew's Church on St Andrew's Street, just below the southern end of Hatton Garden.

There was at least one unplanned consequence of all this: Hogarth, who was a founding governor of the Hospital, set up an art exhibition at its Bloomsbury home, encouraging other artists, such as Gainsborough and Sir Joshua Reynolds to show their works there too.

Visitors flocked to view Britain's first public art gallery at a time when they were almost unknown in Britain. It is reckoned that exhibitions organised there by the Dilettante Society led to the formation of the Royal Academy in 1768. The pictures can still be seen at the Foundling Museum.



Real old Holborn

*Barnard's Inn, which featured in
Great Expectations, has changed
little over the centuries.*

Words by **Vic Keegan**



T

he timbered building on the south side of High Holborn known as Staple Inn, famous for being pictured on Old Holborn tobacco packets, is often presumed to be an intact survivor of Tudor London. Not really. Though listed and of Tudor origin, it has become an example of what archaeologists call “virtually modern fakes”, with the beams and woodwork put in comparatively recently as part of a reconstruction following wartime bomb damage.

If you want to see a bit of really old Holborn, walk a few yards down the road towards Fetter Lane to a small doorway marked Barnard’s Inn, which dates back to at least 1400. It sports signs on either side saying “Gresham College”, revealing it to be the home of a unique educational institution which is still going strong after over 400 years.

Barnard’s Inn, like Staple Inn, was one of the old Inns of Chancery – sort of prep schools for lawyers wanting to join one of the Inns of Court, such as Lincoln’s Inn. Within, stands Barnard’s Inn Hall, whose structure today is much as it was in the 15th century.

The hall is all that remains of the mansion of John Mackworth, the Dean Of Lincoln who died in 1451. Archaeologist John Schofield describes it as “the only surviving medieval secular timber structure of domestic scale in the City”. The roof timbers contain the last crown posts, a specialised wood structure, in the whole of London.

Mackworth left the whole of the property to the Dean and Chapter of Lincoln, which subsequently leased it to a man called Lionel Barnard, from whom it takes its name. It was converted into an Inn of Chancery soon after, attached to Gray’s Inn. Not everyone was an admirer. Charles Dickens allowed his character Pip to lodge at Barnard’s Inn in *Great Expectations*, where it is dismissed as “the dingiest collection of shabby buildings ever squeezed together, in a rank corner, as a club for Tom-cats.”

Gresham College was founded separately in 1597 under the will of the amazing Sir Thomas Gresham in order to provide free public lectures for anyone who wants to hear them and has continued to do so throughout its long and distinguished history. It is, though, a recent arrival at Barnard's Inn – lectures began there in 1991. The college was originally in Bishopsgate, where Tower 42 – formerly the Nat West Tower – was later built, and it had a number of other homes before arriving at its present one.

“If you want to see Barnard’s Hall, one of the ways is to simply turn up at a lecture.”

If you want to see Barnard's Hall, one of the ways is to simply turn up at a lecture, though they are sometimes moved to the Museum of London if they become too popular. These days, they are also live streamed and available afterwards from the college archive and on YouTube. It is an astonishing educational resource, which is still not widely known about.

Another venerable repository of learning, the Royal Society – whose early members included Robert Boyle, Robert Hooke and Christopher Wren – was founded at Gresham College in 1660 and also still going strong.

Gresham himself was an extremely rich and powerful man – among other things he built the Royal Exchange, London's first stock market – and although his reputation is being re-appraised in the light of how he made his money, there is no doubt about the huge contribution he made to London.



St Giles

Poetry and plague
in St Giles
P35

The Great Beer Flood
P41

St Giles owes its existence to a famous London crossroads where business interests and charitable concerns meet. Traders making their way along the Great Northern, Great Western and Oxford Roads came together at this junction in the fields between the cities of London and Westminster.

It was an ideal spot for building a leper hospital, which relied on donations from wealthy merchants to meet its running costs. The church attached to the hospital since its foundation in 1101 was dedicated to St Giles and gave its name to the neighbourhood that grew up around it.

The changing fortunes of this place can be summed up as a story of plagues, poets and pop stars – an epicentre of the Great Plague of London with connections to numerous writers - including Mary Shelley, creator of Frankenstein - and home to Denmark Street, England's 'Tin Pan Alley', where Elton John, David Bowie and The Rolling Stones wrote and recorded.

This chapter offers snippets of this changing history, which is part of my own DNA. Descendants of Irish immigrants, my great-grandparents lived in an overcrowded room on Neal Street. The building later became the birthplace of punk rock and now hosts an artisan bakery!

Today's St Giles contains a diverse range of businesses, from global tech brands to innovative

AI start-ups to major retail chains and exclusive boutiques. It's a hub for creative businesses serving theatres and filmmakers, and the location of countless universities, colleges and schools.

It's also a place of great need, attracting people who are homeless and often suffering from addictions and poor mental health. The St Giles and St George Charity, now a separate organisation from the church but run by a board comprised of its members, is one of the area's largest charitable benefactors.

No longer surrounded by fields, St Giles has become a neighbourhood at the centre of the city. Despite all the changes over the last 900 years, it remains a great crossroads. All who pass through it are warmly welcomed.

Reverend Phillip Dawson
Curate, St Giles in the Fields



Poetry and plague in St Giles

There has been a place of worship on the site for hundreds of years amid a district with a decidedly mixed history.

Words by **Vic Keegan**

T

he name Matilda is best known these days as that of the hit musical staged at the Cambridge Theatre. But it is another Matilda to whom the area is most indebted - Matilda, wife of Henry I and Queen Regent in his absence, who, in 1101, established a leper colony in what were then open fields. The chapel built there eventually morphed into the church of St Giles in the Fields, following the Dissolution of the Monasteries in the 1540s, and lent its name to a St Giles district that has witnessed an astonishing series of ups and downs.

It is reckoned to have been the earliest victim of the 1665 outbreak of plague, the terrible effects of which were encountered by Samuel Pepys when he passed through the parish.

The area was also badly hit by the cholera epidemic of 1848, by which time St Giles had become one of the most notorious - but by no means the only - rookery in London. Death has also visited St Giles in a more macabre way.

During the 15th Century, the gallows that had been at Smithfield were moved to where today's Flitcroft Street meets St Giles High Street and remained there for well over 100 years, uncomfortably close to a church which was supposed to be saving souls.

At the churchyard gate, condemned criminals were offered a bowl of ale, the so-called "St Giles's Bowl", as their last refreshment in this life - one of the supposed origins of the phrase "one for the road". Anthony Babington and his co-conspirators in the Babington Plot were the last to be hanged and disembowelled there in 1586 for plotting to assassinate the Protestant Elizabeth I in favour of the Roman Catholic Mary, Queen of Scots. The gallows were later moved to Tyburn (today's Marble Arch), but those executed there continued to be buried at St Giles.





Over the centuries, St Giles had become truly cosmopolitan. Evidence of Irish immigrants can be traced to the 1620s, and of Greeks and Armenians to the 1640s. The area also attracted Huguenots escaping persecution in France.

In 1675, it was noted that, "the poor do daily increase by the frequent resort of poore people from several countries and places, for want of due care to prevent the same". That was the backdrop to artist William Hogarth's 1751 masterpiece of social degradation Gin Lane, when there were reckoned to be over 500 gin shops in an area of 3,000 houses.

Improvements came, yet by the 19th century St Giles was still a notorious slum. A survey of the rookeries in 1849 - following fresh arrivals of Irish immigrants escaping the potato famine - revealed that between 50 and 90 people found nightly accommodation in some four-roomed houses. There was a very high death rate in the parish, with 190 burials in July 1840, and 1,856 for the year as a whole. In 1847, the construction of New Oxford Street, joining Oxford Street and High Holborn, blasted its way through the northern end of the slums. This improved east-west communications but poverty-stricken residents had nowhere else to go.

One of the ironies of St Giles is that it also attracted creative and affluent people, who often lived surprisingly close to the poor. Church records dating from 1733, when the current church building was consecrated, show that there were still many aristocratic residents in the parish. Cecil Calvert, the 2nd Lord Baltimore, who founded the American province of Maryland, is memorialised as one of those buried there.

The handsome galleried interior of the church is rich in history, including the graves of Andrew Marvell, poet and politician, who wrote the wonderful *To His Coy Mistress*, and of George Chapman, whose translation of Homer had John Keats in thrall. The children of Lord Byron and Percy Bysshe Shelley and Mary Shelley were baptised in the font. There is also a pulpit from which John and Charles Wesley preached.

Today's St Giles in-the-Fields is Anglican and the third to have been built on the site. Flitcroft Street takes its name from its architect, Henry Flitcroft. It not only performs religious duties but also reaches out to the street homeless, working with specialist charities such as St Mungo's, Quaker Homeless Action, Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous. A café and lending library are available for these rough sleepers, together with other facilities. Social conditions today are a far cry from the degradation the church has seen in the past, but are still a reminder of problems that never go away.



The Great Beer Flood

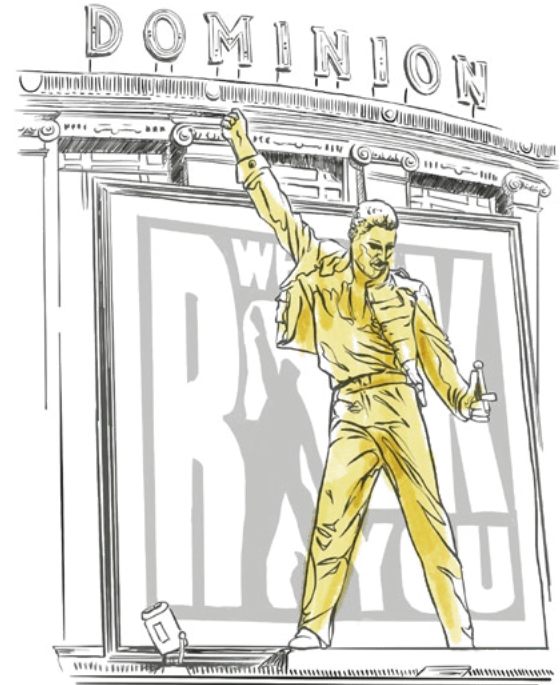
It would have been funny had its consequences not been so terrible.

Words by Vic Keegan

T

he Dominion Theatre at the junction of Oxford Street and Tottenham Court Road has staged a roll call of hit musicals down the decades, including *Grease*, *We Will Rock You*, which ran for 12 years from 2002, *Cleopatra*, *Porgy and Bess*, *South Pacific*, which ran for four years from 1958, and, of course, *The Sound of Music*. But few of its many punters are likely to have been aware of a major incident that took place on the site many years before the theatre was built.

It would have been comic had it not been so tragic. The Great London Beer Flood occurred on 17 October 1814 at the Horseshoe brewery, owned by Henry Meux of the Meux brewing dynasty. It happened when the corroded hoops of a vat standing over seven yards high triggered the explosive release of over a quarter of a million gallons of maturing porter, a favourite tippie of working men and street porters, from whom the drink's name was adopted.



The resulting torrent did severe damage to the brewery's walls and caused several heavy wooden beams to collapse, before raging on to hit a tightly packed area of squalid houses nearby. Eight women and children were killed. It would have been much worse if the accident had happened later in the day after other residents had returned from work.

Martyn Cornell, who has researched the incident, says that most if not all of those who died were poor Irish immigrants, part of a mass of people living in the slums around the infamous St Giles rookeries, which were later cleared away when New Oxford Street was built. It is known that many of those living in cellars had to climb on to their furniture to avoid the flood.

There were stories at the time of people partying on the freak availability of free beer. Very few of these have been authenticated, although 20 years later an anonymous American visitor who had been walking along New Street, one of the most affected areas, wrote: "All at once, I found myself borne onward with great velocity by a torrent which burst upon me so suddenly as almost to deprive me of breath. A roar of falling buildings at a distance, and suffocating fumes, were in my ears and nostrils. I was rescued with great difficulty by the people who immediately collected around me."

The construction of New Oxford Street attracted new industries to the area. One of the catalysts of change was the celebrated impresario Charles Morton who in 1852 had opened the trend-setting Canterbury Music Hall on Westminster Bridge Road in Lambeth, adjacent to the Canterbury Tavern.

Five years later, in direct response to Morton's success, Edward Weston and his father Henry opened a music hall on the site of the Six Cans and Punch Bowl Tavern on 242-245 High Holborn, close to the Horseshoe brewery. Morton responded in 1861 by taking over the former Boar and Castle pub, which stood directly opposite the Horseshoe on Tottenham Court Road. It was called the Oxford Music Hall because of its proximity to Oxford Street. The Westons opposed this plan on the grounds that there were too many music halls in the area already, but were unsuccessful in their appeal.

Morton's new establishment became one of London's most popular music halls, featuring stars such as George Robey and Marie Lloyd, with some of the acts being moved by coach to the Canterbury between performances. The Times noted that it was "the latest development on a grand scale of a species of entertainment now in great favour with the public".

In 1922 the Horseshoe Brewery was demolished and the Oxford Music Hall closed four years later. But in 1928 the Dominion opened, as one form of musical entertainment replaced another. Over the road, the site of the Oxford is where the first Virgin megastore was briefly located and, more recently, the home of Primark. That's life.

Bloom sbury

Bloomsbury
Square's
bloody history
P51

A wondrous
church spire
P57

Stories of a
Bloomsbury
hotel
P61

Bloomsbury is not just a place, but an idea, an atmosphere and a concept of a literary and creative past.

For many, its name conjures up the early 20th century Bloomsbury Group who were famed as much for their liberal lifestyles and challenges to convention as for their writing and artworks.

For others, Bloomsbury's international reputation comes from the layout of its numerous garden squares – the earliest of which dates back to 1631.

The area's current long-term residents include a shifting population of students, workers and migrants who originate from all over the globe and now live among its many historic buildings, universities and urban landscapes.

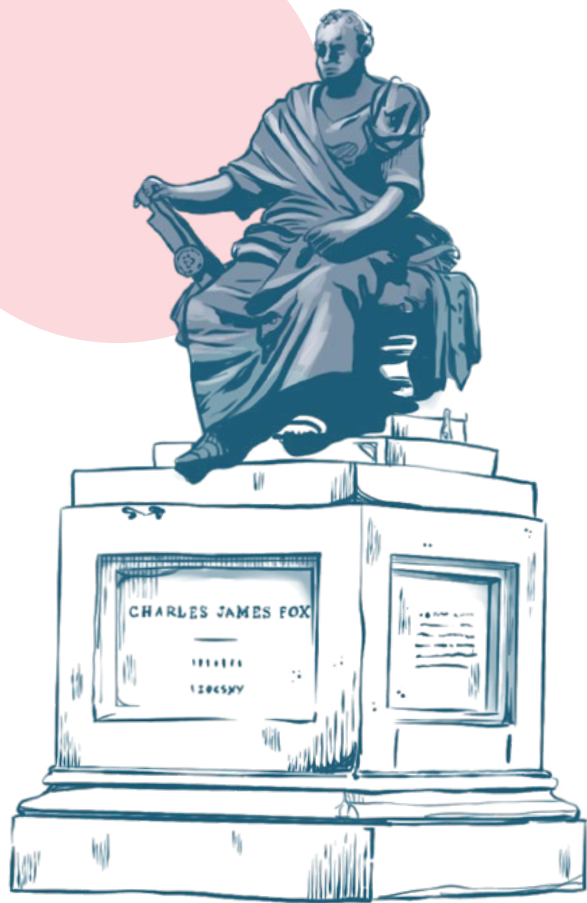
The Bloomsbury Festival is an annual gathering of all those communities and their talents. Organisers work year-round with local artists, scientists, philosophers, performers and poets to bring their talents to the fore during 10 days each October.

In 2023, the festival worked with young people and local groups to identify the contemporary culture of the area.

We asked residents to give their impressions of the place. They responded by describing it as a wonderful area in which to live, with so much history – everywhere! They spoke of its squares, walks and tourists and its role as a little oasis of greenery in the centre of London. They saw it as a hub for learning, a place of social change and activism as well literary inspiration and a home to like-minded creatives who are passionate about the arts.

As part of the 'New Bloomsbury Set' project we have involved Bloomsbury people from Bangladeshi, Somali, East Asian, South Asian, European and many other backgrounds in the festival's activities, exploring with them how their contributions and experiences are adding new strands to Bloomsbury's story.

Rosemary Richards
Director, Bloomsbury Festival



Bloomsbury Square's bloody history

Though founded in an idyllic location, it has lurid associations with violence and death.

Words by **Vic Keegan**

I

t has a good claim to being the first of central London's iconic squares, though it hasn't the audacity to say it is the most picturesque. And sitting, as it does, on top of a London Underground car park hardly enriches its mystique. But what Bloomsbury Square lacks in surface charm, it makes up for with history.

The square was founded in the early 1660s by Thomas Wriothesley, Earl of Southampton, the son of the Wriothesley to whom William Shakespeare dedicated many of his sonnets. He was also the father of Lady Rachel Russell, of whom more later.

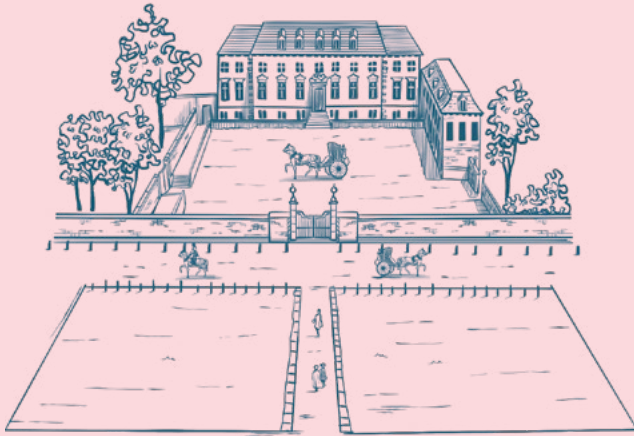
A building called Southampton House occupied the northern end of today's Bloomsbury Square. It was later renamed Bedford House after the Southamptons were joined in matrimony to the Bedford family, which still owns much of the neighbourhood's land today. It was an idyllic spot at the time.

To the west it was soon joined by the grandiose Montagu House, later dismantled to become the British Museum. Beyond those two aristocratic mansions was the end of London – all open fields as far as the eye could see.

Everard Maynwaring, a distinguished physician of the time, summed up its attractions as "the best air and finest prospect, being the highest ground...a fit place for nobility and gentry to reside". Thomas Macaulay said that foreign princes "were taken to see the square as one of the wonders of England". Even the often curmudgeonly essayist Augustus Hare observed: "It is one of the most sedate and beautiful outdoor attractions in the whole of London."

Idyllic it may have been, but it was also a killing field. Like the area behind Montagu House, its remoteness made it a place for the gallants of the day to settle their debts of honour with pistols or swords at dawn. The most notorious occasion was on 9 April 1694, when the 23-year-old Scottish economist and financier John Law fought Edward "Beau" Wilson, killing him with the first thrust of his sword. Both men were smitten by Elizabeth Villiers, a society beauty and former mistress of King William. To adapt a later quip about Bloomsbury folk, they loved in triangles and duelled in squares – fatally.

Law was found guilty of murder and sentenced to death, but, to cut a long story short, escaped prison and went abroad, later becoming the Controller General of Finances for France – some say he was *de facto* Prime Minister – using new economic theories that were later endorsed by John Maynard Keynes.



Bloomsbury Square had already been associated with death. In 1683, Lord William Russell, husband of Lady Rachel Russell, was accused of treason for his alleged part in the Rye House plot to ambush Charles II and his brother – the future James II – in order to forestall a Catholic succession. Lady Rachel stood by her husband throughout the trial, at which Lord Russell was found guilty. He was beheaded in nearby Lincoln's Inn Fields by the notoriously barbaric and incompetent executioner Jack Ketch. Lady Russell continued to live in Bloomsbury Square until she died, aged 87, in 1723, leaving voluminous letters providing insight into 17th century aristocratic life. Lord Russell was granted a posthumous reprieve.

Prior to that, in 1642, Bloomsbury Square had experienced the whiff of warfare, when it was the site of one of the ring of forts around London constructed by Oliver Cromwell to protect against an expected invasion by Charles I's army.

That didn't materialise. But the square was badly hit during the Gordon Riots of June 1780 – disturbances on a scale at least as damaging as those of the French Revolution nine years later.

The house of Lord Mansfield, the Lord Chief Justice – on the side of the square where Victoria House is today – was one of the chief targets. The building was all but destroyed by the anti-Catholic rioters, including Mansfield's precious library, though the Lord himself managed to escape by way of his back door.

There is an unexpected sequel to this story. Somehow, Mansfield became the presiding judge at the trial of the riots' leader, Lord George Gordon. Mansfield weighed the pros and cons with such stereotypically English fairness that Gordon was acquitted of the charges against him, even though he had set in motion the chain of events which had led to Mansfield's house being attacked.

Today, Bloomsbury Square suffers from having a main road to its south, a swanky Grecian art-deco creation to its east and that car park underneath, though it does also have a handsome John Nash-designed house at the north west corner attached to an early Nash terrace in which the celebrated architect once lived. There is a commanding statue of the remarkable Whig politician Charles Fox at the north end. His back is turned to the square itself, but we are free to sit in the middle of it and contemplate its intriguing history.



A wondrous church spire

Nicholas Hawksmoor's magnificent church is best known for the unusual construction on the top of it, which is inspired by a Wonder of the World.

Words by **Vic Keegan**

I

It is easy to mistake St George's church in Bloomsbury Way for a spire with a church hanging underneath it. Nicholas Hawksmoor's English baroque masterpiece, consecrated in 1730, was necessarily constructed in cramped surroundings, because there were already buildings on either side. That is why from most approaches, and especially from the British Museum, all you see is the spire until you arrive at the church itself.

But what a spire! It is a building in its own right. Its sculptures of lions and unicorns – two of each, all recent recreations of the originals standing more than ten feet high – represent the conflict between Jacobites and the Crown. Far above them stands a statue of George – not Saint George, the founding father of the church, but King George I, the reigning monarch of the time.

The only statue of that King George in London, it looks almost like a case of product placement, as it is highly unusual to have a monarch on top of a church, let alone one dressed in a Roman toga bestriding a stretched pyramid above a mini-temple. Not even Henry VIII thought of that. Unsurprisingly, the Church Commissioners were reluctant to pay for such a frivolous work, but eventually gave way. It is, to say the least, distinctive.

Most people first come across the spire unknowingly when they look at William Hogarth's famous apocalyptic painting *Gin Lane* (1751). It is a picture of a city imploding under the effects of cheap gin, thanks to William of Orange's promotion of Dutch spirits. But it also shows a beacon of hope in the background – yes, it is the spire of St George's.

The church was partly built in order that the “better sort” could have a place of worship away from the nearby St Giles, which was right in the middle of the rookery of which *Gin Lane* was a part. This was not a convenient place for the carriages of the affluent, who were arriving in droves at newly-fashionable Bloomsbury, to linger.

One of the numerous people to be fascinated by Hawksmoor's spire was the artist J M W Turner. He used his own drawings of it to illustrate the first perspective lecture he gave at the Royal Academy in January 1811, which discussed the effect of viewing the spire from the ground at different angles.

Hawksmoor dug into an escapist past with this spire. It is based on one of the Seven Wonders of the World, the Mausoleum of King Mausolus at Halicarnassus in Turkey, or at least Pliny the Elder's description of it. The building, 140 feet in height, was not finished when Halicarnassus died, but the sculptors and masons carried on to complete the job. It dominated the surrounding area for some seventeen centuries until a series of earthquakes in the 13th century destroyed it. But it lived on in name, because Mausolous became the generic name for grandiose memorials or mausoleums.



Stories of a Bloomsbury hotel

The former Hotel Russell is famous for its Titanic links, but has an extraordinary backstory too.

Words by **Vic Keegan**


 T

The Kimpton Fitzroy Hotel stands imperiously in Russell Square displaying its thé-au-lait (“tea with milk”) terracotta frontage, including statues of four queens – Elizabeth I, Mary II, Victoria and Anne.

From 1900, when it was opened, until 2018, when it was relaunched under new owners, it was known by its original name of Hotel Russell, where early meetings of the Russell Group of universities took place. But the Fitzroy part of its present name is a nod to its architect, Charles Fitzroy Doll, from whom the term “dolloed up” is derived due to his liking for decorative facades – in this case using material from the Doulton potteries in Lambeth.

Behind that facade lies a sumptuous interior with a story of its own. A feature of the Kimpton is its dining hall, which looks copied from that of the Titanic. Actually, it is the other way around – the dining room of the Titanic was copied from the hotel’s by its designer, Fitzroy himself. The hotel also contains a small bronze dragon called Lucky George, which is identical to one lost on the Titanic. A further connection is that some Titanic passengers spent the night at the hotel before boarding.

The site of the hotel has a previous, now buried, history thanks to Frederick Calvert, who, upon his father’s death in 1751, became the sixth Baron Baltimore (an Irish peerage) at the age of 20. As a result of this – would you believe it – he inherited Maryland in the United States, which had been in his family since Charles I gave it to his ancestor George Calvert, the 1st Baron Baltimore. The Mary in Maryland refers to Charles’s wife Henrietta Maria. It was a British colony the size of Belgium, which produced income from rents and taxes worth the equivalent of many millions today.

In 1759 the young Calvert used some of this income to build a mansion called Baltimore House in the gardens of the palatial Southampton House – later renamed Bedford House – in Great Russell Street, next door to Montagu House where the British Museum is today. Beyond lay open fields, marking the end of London. Baltimore House stood where the future Hotel Russell would later appear.

Frederick Calvert was an extraordinary man for whom sin might have been invented. An old Etonian, he presided over Maryland with almost feudal powers but never actually set foot there, preferring instead to squander his riches, which were mainly derived from tobacco and the slave trade. Unlike some contemporaries, who salved their consciences with good works, he blew it on often public debauchery.

And how! Calvert led what has been described as “an extravagant and often scandalous lifestyle” culminating in 1768 with an accusation of abduction and rape by Sarah Woodcock, a local beauty who ran a milliner’s shop in Tower Hill. An all-male jury acquitted him, but not many believed the verdict.

He fled the country soon after and travelled around Italy and then Constantinople, which he had to leave after being accused of keeping a private harem. It wasn’t so very private, as he was known to parade his entourage of five white women and one black one brazenly in public.

Calvert was so fascinated with the Ottoman Turks that on his return to England he pulled down part of Baltimore House in order to reconstruct it in the style of a Turkish harem. Following his death in Naples, Maryland was inherited by one of his numerous illegitimate children, Henry Harford, aged 13.

After that, Charles Powlett, the 3rd Duke of Bolton and a Whig politician, took a lease on Baltimore House and renamed it Bolton House. This restored its prestige, but only a little. Historian Edward Walford described Bolton as “equally eccentric” as Baltimore.

Powlett did some good deeds – in 1739 he was one of the founding governors of the nearby Foundling Hospital, which did sterling work for orphaned children.

But he is mainly remembered for a long standing affair with the actress Lavinia Fenton, which started in 1728 and lasted until 1751, when his wife Lady Anne died. He then married Fenton, who by then had already borne him three children.

This relationship has been immortalised by William Hogarth, whose famous painting of John Gay’s *The Beggar’s Opera* shows the Duke, sitting on the right of the stage, eyeing Lavinia during a performance. Goodness.

Calvert led what has been described as “an extravagant and often scandalous lifestyle.”

Clerke nwell

The magazine
trailblazer
P71

Red
Clerkenwell
Green
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Medieval
gems
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Clerkenwell is a tucked-away area, just up from Farringdon station and home to architectural and design studios, museums and, in my opinion, some of the best pubs in London.

Its name derives from the ancient well used by medieval parish clerks. Still visible on Farringdon Lane, it would have been the primary local source of water in those times.

Old and new sit side by side in Clerkenwell. It is where, in the 1140s, the monastic Order of St John founded its English headquarters, known as the Priory of Clerkenwell.

The priory stretched from its entrance at St John's Gate right across the Clerkenwell district, which explains why several streets close to its former lands have "St John" in their name. You can also find actual remnants of it in surprising places. For example, if you're staying at the Zetter Hotel and head down to the loos, you'll see part of its original wall.

Once you've had your fill of all things monastic, Clerkenwell's food and drink scene is another joy to explore. The area is home to St John's Restaurant, which has championed "nose to tail eating" since 1994 and later introduced London to the most exquisite doughnuts.

If you venture further north you'll discover Little Italy, so-called because in the 1850s 2,000 Italians came to live there. The focal point is St Peter's Italian Church. Designed in the Roman basilica style, it serves the largest Roman Catholic community in London.

While you're there, you mustn't miss Terroni of Clerkenwell next door. A visit to this deli is like stepping into Italy itself. Supplying Clerkenwell with panettone and Parma ham since 1878, it is also a great place for a lunchtime plate of pasta – providing you can get a table!

Many parts of London offer mixtures of past and present, but Clerkenwell's is both unique and among the most fascinating. I've been able to mention only a few of its special features here. There are many, many others to enjoy.

Claudia Chalmers

Business Development Manager, Museum of the Order of St John



The magazine trailblazer

He created perhaps the world's first general interest periodical and published the first parliamentary reporting.

Words by **Vic Keegan**

In January 1731 the seeds of a breakthrough in journalism were sown in the unlikely setting of the gatehouse of an old priory in Clerkenwell. It was from there, at St John's Gate, that Edward Cave launched a monthly publication called *The Gentleman's Magazine*, which has a good claim to being the first of its kind in the English-speaking world.

There were other periodicals around, but they limited themselves to particular subjects. *The Gentleman's Magazine* broke new ground by covering a wide variety. Cave actually invented the very word "magazine", which was derived from a similar one in French, meaning "storehouse". *The Gentleman's Magazine* lasted until 1922 – nearly 200 years, 50 of them while based at the gatehouse – and spawned numerous imitations across the world.

The very first issue was a hit, despite being a bit hard to digest. Stories, obituaries, appointments and many other items were vacuumed up from other sources and packed like sardines into 50 pages with no pictures.

It contained items lifted from specialist journals such as the *Craftsman*, the *London Journal*, *Fog's Journal*, the *Grub Street Journal* and the *Weekly Register*. There was a poem by Poet Laureate Colley Cibber accompanied by a panegyric to Cibber himself – sample line: "Sing a floreat to the laureate" – written by Stephen Duck, an agricultural labourer from Wiltshire who had been taken up by George II's wife Queen Caroline. (In 1733 Caroline revived the post of governor of Duck Island in St James's Park and gave it to Stephen, who became Duck of Duck Island).

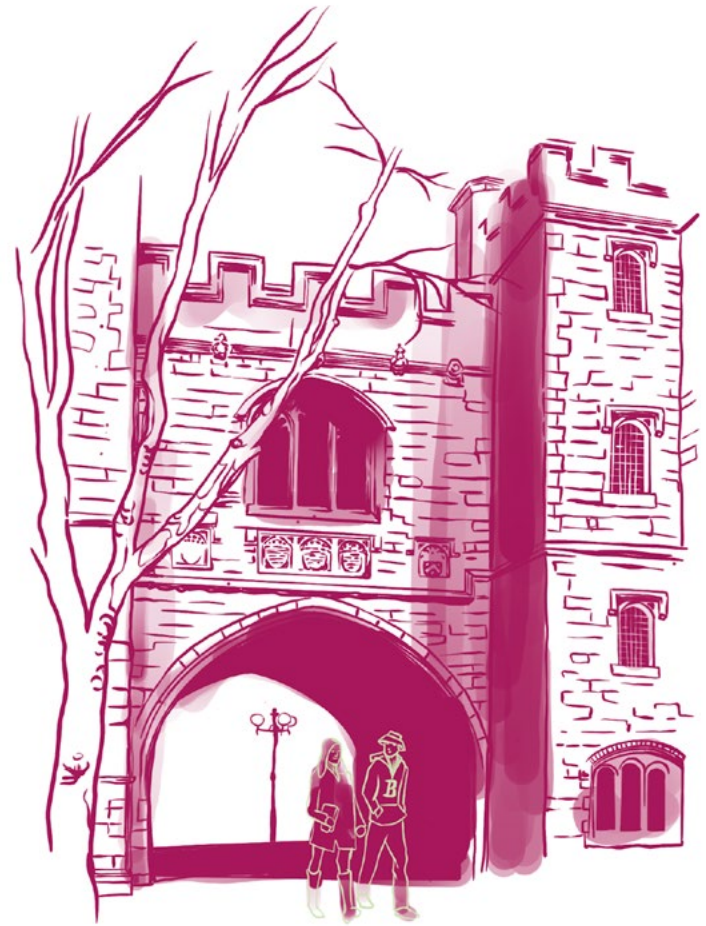
Why was Cave able to do this? Because he exploited the weak copyright laws of the time by paying hardly anyone at all for their work. He had form for this sort of thing: the son of a cobbler, he attended Rugby School but was expelled after being accused of stealing from the headmaster.

But *The Gentleman's Magazine* was also a major innovator in a different way. It began reporting what went on in Parliament at a time when – can you believe it? – it was illegal to do so. His reporters would sit in the public gallery and later write up whatever they could remember. Being one of Cave's House of Commons reporters, from 1741 to 1743, was among Samuel Johnson's first regular jobs. He even had a small room or garret of his own at the gatehouse.

The gatehouse building was already associated with illustrious figures. Richard Hogarth, a classical scholar, school teacher and father of legendary painter William Hogarth, set up a coffee shop in its east tower in around 1704. He conceived it as a haven for gentlemen to meet and converse in Latin. Such institutions were often called "penny universities", as you paid a penny for entrance and enlightenment. But enlightenment didn't pay in Richard's case and the enterprise, sadly, folded in 1707.

However, the greatest of all of the literary worthies who graced the gatehouse came earlier – William Shakespeare. He would have been a frequent visitor in his time, as the gatehouse contained the office of the Master of the Revels, who vetted every play performed in London in case any contained criticism of the monarch, Elizabeth I, or other seditious material.

The gatehouse, steeped in history, is well worth a visit. Dating from the 1540s, since the 1870s it has been the headquarters of the admirable English Order of St John, which is rightly proud of its medieval origins and monks who cared for sick pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem. Today, as well as offices, it has a fascinating museum and puts on guided tours. No Latin required.





Red Clerkenwell Green

Advocates of progressive change have gathered on this spot since the 14th century.

Words by **Vic Keegan**

I

n 2017 a public consultation took place about proposals to improve Clerkenwell Green by creating “a more pleasant and greener local environment”. Yes, it was finally admitted that the green was green no more and hadn’t been for hundreds of years.

Indeed, if you had to assign a colour to this intriguing area of small businesses and big politics it would more appropriately be red, given that radicals have been attracted to it since medieval times like bees to a hive. And in this, Clerkenwell was ahead of its time – what was radical in the past is the status quo today.

Clerkenwell’s love affair with social change goes back to at least 1381 during the Peasants’ Revolt, when Wat Tyler and his insurgents from Kent protested there about the imposition of a poll tax on everyone irrespective of wealth, an experiment that would remain unpopular.

Much later, the Chartists, working-class agitators, often held meetings on or near the Green. In 1816 they were addressed by “Orator” Henry Hunt, campaigning for such dangerous policies as universal suffrage (albeit just for men) and the abolition of “rotten boroughs” such as Old Sarum, which had no inhabitants yet sent two MPs to Parliament while big industrial conurbations like Manchester had no MPs at all. The Chartists continued to gather, even after 1842 when Robert Peel banned them. All of their top six demands have been met except for one: annual parliaments. Give them time.

It would take a book to document Clerkenwell Green’s radical vibes, which have been described by Peter Ackroyd as an “essential presence”. In the late 1760s John Wilkes, the “champion of liberty” who had been born in a nearby street, addressed a meeting there. In 1826 William Cobbett spoke against the Corn Laws, which kept food prices high for the poor, to a large crowd gathered on the Green.

In the 1860s, the Reform League, which had particularly strong local support, held mass meetings there, as did Fenian agitators, both before and after the infamous Clerkenwell Explosion of 1867.

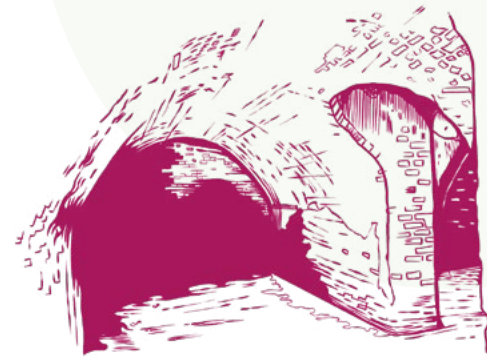
Eleanor Marx Aveling, daughter of Karl Marx, spoke at a gathering of the unemployed on Clerkenwell Green in October 1887 before proceeding with them to Trafalgar Square behind a red flag.

Soon after, William Morris addressed a crowd of some 5,000 on the Green before it headed for the same destination and was attacked by police in what became known as “Bloody Sunday”.

The nearest thing to a memorial to the area’s past is 37a Clerkenwell Green, where the London Patriotic Society was formed in July 1872, partly by John Stuart Mill, on a site which once housed the Welsh Charity School for girls and today hosts the Marx Memorial Library.

The Patriotic Society was regarded at the time as one of the most progressive of the capital’s working men’s clubs, though it was not so radical or progressive that it admitted women even though in theory, despite its name, they were allowed to be part of it. Its membership and shareholders were nearly all local men, with skilled workers making up 80 per cent of them.

Number 37a is also where, in 1902-03, Vladimir Lenin edited and published a number of editions of his *Iskra* journal, which was smuggled into Tsarist Russia to stir revolutionary fervour. It is said that in 1903 at the Crown Tavern a few yards away, Lenin had a drink with Joseph Stalin, who was visiting London on party business in 1903, though this has never been confirmed. If only walls could talk.



The Marx Library may be sitting on a deeper secret. The building which commemorates the author of the slogan “Religion is the opium of the people” may be standing on the site of a medieval religious building – Saint Mary’s Nunnery, which dates back to the 12th century. In the basement of the library are the well-preserved remains of what looks like a crypt. It may have been the cellar of one of the houses that once stood there or an outlying building of the nunnery itself.

The Green is now being transformed by an ongoing re-greening process, with more trees and paved areas – another revolution in its history.



Medieval gems

Hiding behind the gatehouse and wall of the Charterhouse, located between the Barbican and Smithfield on Charterhouse Square, lies one of the capital's least known and most magnificent medieval gems.

Words by **Vic Keegan**

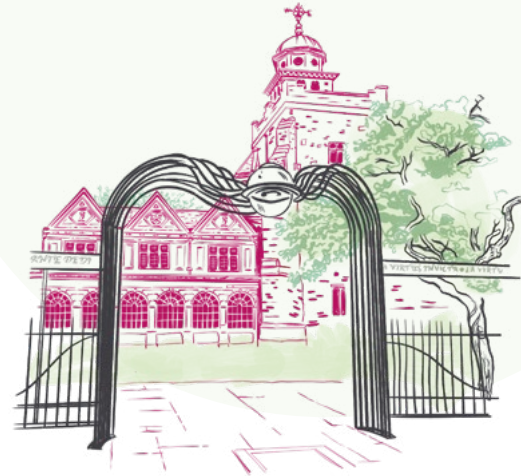
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The surprise is that it is there at all. A remarkable amount of the original Charterhouse building, originally built in 1371 as a monastery for Carthusian monks on land which had seen over 50,000 burials during the Black Death of 1348, has survived later plagues, aristocratic reconstructions, bomb damage during the Blitz and, above all, Henry VIII's dissolution of the monasteries.

Beginning in 1536, this saw many monasteries sold off to Henry's cronies, who often pulled them down. Charterhouse's longevity may be partly thanks to its being acquired in 1545 by Sir Edward (later Lord) North.

He demolished the church, some cloisters and other reminders of Catholicism, but built in their place a beautiful Great Hall and adjoining Great Chamber, which are star attractions of the Charterhouse today. And he also left much of the original complex standing.

The property's next owner was Thomas Howard, 4th Duke of Norfolk - later executed for his part in the Ridolfi plot to put Mary Queen of Scots on the throne. Howard transformed the remains of the religious house to complete a magnificent mansion, fit for entertaining royalty. Elizabeth I and James I both held court there.



Today, the Great Hall provides meals for the Charterhouse's community of residents - its Brothers and Sisters, single people aged over 60 in financial and social need who live in the almshouses there. The Charterhouse is still a charity and any lay person can apply to be a Brother or Sister, as long as they meet the requirements of age and pecuniary circumstances.

There have, of course, been further changes to the original monastery fabric - including a long terrace added by Howard known as the Norfolk Cloister - but parts of the monks' quarters are just as they were, and much original stone was probably re-used when alterations were made.

The Carthusians took a vow of silence, and their clothing “consisted of two hair-cloths, two cowls, two pairs of hose, and a cloak, all of the coarsest manufacture, contrived to almost disfigure their persons”. However, their cells were more like cottages - two storeys high with four rooms, complete with a garden and fresh water piped from local sources at a time when the rest of the population had to battle with polluted water.

They were known as “good monks” as they didn’t succumb to worldly temptations like some other orders. And they refused to recognise Henry as head of the Catholic church. As a consequence, the prior, John Houghton, and six others were hung, drawn and quartered. Houghton’s head was severed and affixed to London Bridge as a warning to others, and one of his limbs impaled on the gatehouse of the monastery.

The Norfolk Cloister, which used to be twice as long as it is now, is one of the delights of the Charterhouse. It still harbours one of the original monk’s cells, complete with stone serving hatch. And after the original Charterhouse school was built on the site in 1611, the boys who went there used it for playing football. The Charterhouse claims, with some justification, to have played a leading role in creating the rules of the game, including the offside rule and skills such as dribbling.



Famous people who have passed through the Charterhouse include Thomas More, John Wesley, William Makepeace Thackeray, Prime Minister the Earl of Liverpool, conductor Simon Raven and Roger Williams, the founder of Rhode Island. There is also a rolling cast of aristocrats, but it was a member of the nouveau riche who left the biggest mark on these hallowed remains.

Thomas Sutton was the richest commoner in Britain. He purchased the Charterhouse as a home for the almshouses and the school, which later relocated to Godalming. Sutton died soon after becoming the owner, but the Charterhouse went on to rapidly become the wealthiest institution of its kind in Europe. It aimed to prove the superiority of Protestant good works over Catholic practices.

Sutton started his working life as the servant of two powerful aristocrats in Tudor England and ended up so rich he lent money to them. Where did it come from? He owned the biggest coal mines in the north-east of England, and as a moneylender charged as much as 10 per cent in interest. Nonetheless, Daniel Defoe, author of *Robinson Crusoe*, praised Sutton’s endowment as “the greatest and noblest gift that was ever given for charity.”

Farrin gdon

Turnmill
Street
P93

Gin capital
of the world
P99

Farringdon contains a wealth of different types and styles of business, which together create an amazing pocket of London, full of design and architectural gems that many people have yet to discover. It is a very special corner of Clerkenwell.

My connection with the area began when I was a locations scout, looking for good places for companies to do photo shoots or product launches. Late one night, I drove past the Old Sessions House. I'd never seen it before. I said to myself, "where has this been?"

At that time it was home to a restaurant and bar. Later, during Covid, when it had to close down, the owner let me use it for a wide range of events. Then Knotel moved in and asked me to become their head of events, so I got to stay in the building I'd fallen in love with.

It is over 200 years old and the setting chosen by Charles Dickens for the sentencing of Oliver Twist after he was caught stealing a pocket watch. You can still see prison cells in the basement.

A lot of the life of this area stems from Farringdon station. The arrival of the Elizabeth line has made it a lot more accessible from the centre of London and putting it on the map as a destination in its own right. But a lot of people have their heads down when they come up from the platforms or they're hurrying somewhere else so they don't have time to appreciate what they're walking past.

"To this day I'm amazed by some of the buildings I walk past just going from A to B"

To this day I'm amazed by some of the buildings I walk past just going from A to B. There are lovely little alleyways slightly off the beaten track and we're surrounded by beautiful churches. Of course, new buildings are always going up as well. That's fine – I'm all for growth. Just as long as it is done respectfully so we retain all that is best about this place.

Gavin Guild

External Event Manager, Knotel at the Old Sessions House



Turnmill Street

Industry, religion, George IV and every kind of vice form part of an extraordinary history that beguiled Shakespeare and many others.

Words by **Vic Keegan**

T

urnmill Street in Clerkenwell is one of the oldest thoroughfares in London. It has seen it all, from high life to low life, from thriving small businesses to abject poverty and, most curiously, being lionised by the likes of William Shakespeare and Ben Jonson. The street has been there, sometimes known by its alter ego Turnbull Street, since medieval maps were invented. Its history and that of its immediate neighbourhood are a microcosm of London's constant re-invention of itself.

There was a horse and cattle market at next door Smithfield from at least the 12th century, and before the Dissolution of the Monasteries the district must have been a paradigm of Merrie England. Situated near the Priory of St John, which dispatched escorted pilgrimages to the Holy Land, and the nunnery of St Mary, it lay outside the bustle of the City of London, and where Turnmill Street ended, so did the capital. Some maps even named what became the adjacent Farringdon Road "Town's End Lane".

The Dissolution created a break with the area's previous history. It threw huge amounts of religious lands on to the market to be snapped up by aristocrats and Henry VIII's court favourites. William Pinks, the chronicler of Clerkenwell, says that towards the end of the

17th century it was "a delightful place of residence attracting nobility", yet the 1661 rate book showed 112 Turnmill Street residents assessed as poor.

Craft industries arrived, including clock and watch making by Huguenots fleeing persecution in France. Some of these trades were powered by the mill that gave the street its name and also emptied effluent into an already-polluted River Fleet. The industrial revolution brought more immigrants, this time from Italy, and also bigger industries, such as breweries, distilleries and printing. The American caramel manufacturer Murray & Co. employed 300 people in Turnmill Street and the headquarters of Booth's Gin was based in and around it for 200 years.

The biggest transformation came in 1863 with the arrival of the Metropolitan Railway, the world's first underground service, which initially ran from Paddington to near the end of Turnmill Street. Butchers, bakers, candle manufacturers, coach builders, craft activities and even charcoal burners in Turnmill Street had to move as buildings on the west side of the street were demolished for the Clerkenwell "improvements", which also involved building the new Farringdon Road.



One outcome was the decline of the most notorious red light district in the whole of London. Turnmill Street might have been designed for depravity – a short road with least 20 narrow alleys or courts on either side, filled with criminals and prostitutes. What made it different from other London rookeries was the attention bestowed on it by an amazing number of great literary figures.

Shakespeare lets Falstaff (in Henry IV, Part 2) moan that Justice Shallow “hath done nothing but prate to me of the wildness of his youth and the feats he hath done in Turnbull Street”. Pericles was written in conjunction with resident innkeeper and brothel owner George Wilkins, which lends an unusual authenticity to the play’s brothel scenes.

In Ben Jonson’s Bartholomew Fair, Ursula is indignant at being charged with frequenting Turnbull Street. A character in Thomas Middleton’s Chaste Maid has twins by someone she met there. Thomas Webster’s A Cure for Cuckolds features someone who comes to an inn in Turnbull Street and “falls in league with a wench”. In Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher’s play The Scornful Lady a character moans that the “drinking, swearing and whoring” that has been going on means “we have all lived in a perpetual Turnbull Street”. And so it goes on.

Much of the surrounding area became known as “Jack Ketch’s Warren,” because so many people there ended up being hanged,

as can be seen in the Old Bailey’s online records. Jack Ketch was the common name for a hangman.

A pub at the junction of Turnmill Street and Cowcross Street, which used to form part of the southern end of Turnmill, has left a particular mark on history.

Imagine the scene. A man had been gaming at the notorious Hockley-in-the-Hole bear baiting pit, which stood on the site of today’s gastropub The Coach (you can hear the subterranean flow of the River Fleet from a drain outside its front door). He ran out of money and asked the landlord of the nearby Castle Inn if he could lend him some to pay his debt. He proffered a gold watch as surety.



The owner of the timepiece turned out to be George IV on one of his notorious escapades. It is said that a few days later a messenger from the King arrived to redeem the loan with a handsome amount and grant the landlord a licence to be a pawnbroker.

A 19th century reconstruction of the pub, called The Castle, has a handsome pawnbroking sign outside it, the only pub in the country to boast one. Inside, there is a painting depicting George handing over his watch. That alone makes the pub worth a visit.



Gin capital of the world

*The pure waters that gave Goswell Road
and Clerkenwell Road their names lured
the companies that made the classic brands.*

Words by **Vic Keegan**

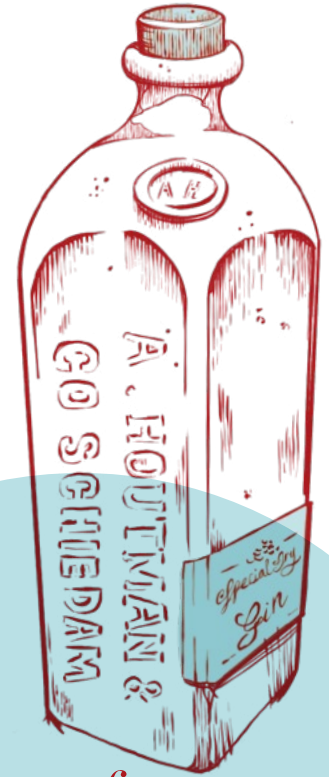
P

Pause for a while beside the easily missed friezes along Britton Street. They are all that remains of the once mighty Booths distillery, which was at the centre of Clerkenwell's astonishing relationship with gin. Two other Clerkenwell gin giants, Gordons and Tanqueray, have also long since left the area.

So has J & W Nicholson, one of the earliest and biggest distilleries, which purchased a site on Woodbridge Street in 1808 before moving to a larger one on St John Street in 1828. Nicholson's classic London dry gin, made using botanicals such as juniper, angelica and liquorice, and said to be the Duke of Wellington's favourite tippie, was exported around the world.

It was the area's celebrated waters – which gave rise to the names Clerken-well and Gos-well Road – that made it a magnet for these well-known gin distillers, though the area also had a bit of previous with “mother's ruin”.

Turnmill Street and surrounding roads were one of the epicentres of the gin craze, which all but brought London to its knees during the 1700s. Its debilitating effects were everywhere, as most famously captured by William Hogarth in his painting *Gin Lane*. It is reckoned that over 6,000 houses in the capital were selling and making gin, often in sordid conditions.



Booths became for a while the biggest distiller in England.

It is easy to understand why the gin craze took hold at a time when poverty was rife and drinking water was contaminated. Gin offered an instant distraction from the mind-blowing misery of everyday life, but its effects were mind-numbing in more than one sense.

Henry Fielding, author of *Tom Jones* and a Bow Street magistrate, warned that if nothing was done to tackle the problem of excessive gin drinking, there would soon be “few of the common people left to drink it”.

Magistrates in Middlesex lamented that gin was “the principal cause of all the vice and debauchery committed among the inferior sort of people”. Some estimates suggested that an amazing 50 per cent of the country’s annual wheat production was given over to gin production – a nice little earner for farmers, which they were reluctant to lose.

From 1729, the government introduced a succession of laws to curb gin drinking, but it was not until the 1751 Gin Act, which put small unlicensed gin shops out of business, that consumption dropped dramatically and the nation woke up from the biggest hangover it had ever experienced. The Act paved the way for bigger “respectable” corporations to move into the market, which they did. Lured by the magic of its clean waters, they made Clerkenwell the gin centre of the world.

The Booth family, which claimed to have been in the wine business since 1569, relocated to London from the north-east of England. In 1740, they established their first distillery at 55 Cowcross Street, practically opposite where Farringdon Station now is, within a neighbourhood where many of the backstreet gin shops flourished and expanded into Britton Street in 1770. With the help of another distillery, based in Brentford, Booths became for a while the biggest distiller in England.






Alexander Gordon, a Scot, built a distillery in Southwark in 1769 before moving to Clerkenwell in 1786. In 1898, his company merged with Charles Tanqueray & Co, which had originated in Bloomsbury just below the British Museum at 3 Vine Street.

All production by the new Tanqueray Gordon company was eventually moved to the Gordon’s Goswell Road site in 1899, which was also the year of the death of Charles Gordon, the last of the Gordon family to be associated with the firm. The relocation set the stage for its consolidation as the biggest gin business in the world, thanks largely to huge sales in the US. The building that housed the distillery can still be seen at Goswell Road’s junction with Moreland Street.

The whiff of gin has long since evaporated from the area. Today, like much of this part of London, it has been colonised by media industries, architects and restaurants. Tomorrow? Who knows?



Central District Alliance is the Business Improvement District for Holborn, Bloomsbury, St Giles, Clerkenwell and Farringdon.

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Central District Alliance

The Central District Alliance Business Improvement District represents over 400 businesses in the London areas of Holborn, St Giles, Bloomsbury, Clerkenwell and Farringdon. This book is a celebration of their remarkable hidden histories.

