

SOCIETY OUTINGS 2007

Organised and Reported by Sylvia Ladyman

Bentley Priory - 30 January

We were very keen to visit Bentley Priory, the home of RAF Fighter Command during World War II, as at the moment the building and surrounding estate are under threat from developers. At the moment it is an Officers' Mess, but not for much longer.

The estate was the site of an Augustinian Priory in 1170, until the Dissolution of the Monasteries. The buildings were demolished and a new house was built which eventually became the property of the 9th Earl of Abercorn, who engaged Sir John Soane to enlarge it. Later, in 1846 it became the home of Queen Adelaide, widow of William IV, until her death in 1849. After several new owners, the house became a hotel, but by 1908 it had become a girls' boarding school. However this too was not a success and it closed in 1924. Finally in 1926 the building and 40 acres of land were sold to the Air Ministry.

Many changes took place to make Operations Rooms and an underground Control Centre. In July 1936 Air Marshall Sir Hugh Dowding arrived and Bentley Priory became the Headquarters of RAF Fighter Command, and so played a vital role throughout the war.

As soon as you enter the building you are aware of the link with the RAF. On each side are stained glass windows with images of aeroplanes and airmen. I remember the beautiful stone staircase with the flags of countries whose airmen were in Fighter Command, the Dowding room with his memorabilia, the Rotunda with pictures of fighter pilots, and an oil painting of the Queen Mother. But the most remarkable item was a commemorative lace panel made in Nottingham in 1942-46. It is fifteen feet long and sixty-five inches wide, and shows scenes of the bombing of London, the badges of allied air forces and, of course, the aircraft themselves.

It was a most interesting visit. I hope the building and its contents can be saved as a museum and heritage site to honour the airmen of Fighter Command 1939-45.

London Archaeological Archive and Research Centre - 19 May

Eighteen members of our Society travelled to what was, for most of us, new territory - Eagle Wharf Road, Hackney, to visit Mortimer Wheeler House. In this former factory are thousands of objects which have been excavated within the M25. We were welcomed by a notice saying *Welcome to the Young Archaeologists*. This pleased us greatly until we were told that a meeting was being held there of a newly formed Young Archaeologists Club.

Adam Corsini gave us a most interesting two hour tour of the Archaeological Archive. He had organised a display of some objects excavated at Bury Street Farm, Ruislip, and in Uxbridge - a spur, buckles, pins, coins and two blue and white tiles. The majority of the collection is stored in cardboard boxes - now row upon row in tall racks of shelving separated by narrow passage ways. Every box is meticulously labelled by volunteers. In another room we suddenly came across the complete skeleton of a young female. Later we were shown a Roman sandal and part of a walrus skull. Further on, were display cases of ceramics and glass; much of the latter from Whitefriars.

Lastly we entered the social and working history section - items from our past, such as an Aladdin stove, a blackboard and easel, old cooking pots, bread bins, typewriters and clocks. I think everyone enjoyed reminiscing, seeing objects they saw long ago, and in some cases still possessed!

Colchester - 23 June

It was a wet day when we visited Colchester, the oldest recorded town in Britain. By 25 BC it was already the capital of the local tribe, the Trinovantes, and called Camulodum. Cunobelin, one of the most powerful early Kings, reigned there from 5 BC to AD 40.

In AD 43 the Romans quickly captured this Iron Age capital and built a fortress. A town soon developed, and it became the first capital of the new Roman Province.

In AD 60 Boudica's army took the town after a two day siege and left it a smouldering ruin. Colchester was rebuilt with a strong protective wall, parts of which are still visible today. The Temple of Claudius and other important buildings were rebuilt. With the coming of the Saxons Colchester gradually declined, but later grew in importance. By 991 it was a market town, and after the Norman Conquest it grew rapidly. In 1076 construction of the Castle began using materials from the former Roman buildings due to the lack of suitable local stone. It was the largest castle ever built by the Normans, and it became a Royal Fortress in the Middle Ages.

Many industries developed – pottery, leather working, and the cloth trade. In 1565 Dutch weavers arrived, fleeing from religious persecution in their homeland. During the Civil War Colchester supported Parliament, but in 1648 a group of Royalists entered the town, as a result of which the Parliamentary army laid siege to the town for seventy-six days. The townspeople were starving and were eating dogs, cats and even candles! Their troubles were not over, as in 1665 four thousand five hundred people (half the population) died from the Plague.

Having had a brief résumé of the history, the town guides took us on an historical tour, commencing with a walk in the Castle grounds, then a visit to the Dutch Quarter just off the High Street. Nearby we saw the remains of part of a Roman Theatre inside a building, and the outline of another part marked in the paving outside.

A little later, a huge water tower came into view – the largest such structure in England, just inside the Roman wall. In fact, two

thirds of this wall still stands, with a well preserved gateway.

We took shelter from the rain in Tymperleys, a wooden framed house dating from 1500, which now houses a clock museum. In the afternoon some people visited Hollytrees Museum housed in a beautiful Georgian Town House in Castle Park. Built in 1718, it has been owned by some of the wealthiest families in Colchester, and now contains artefacts illustrating 300 years of home life. Others visited St Botolph's Priory – the first Augustinian foundation in England, dating from the 12th Century. It is now a ruin, but well worth a visit.

The Castle Museum has one of the largest collections of Roman artefacts in the country. The Colchester Vase is one of the finest examples of Roman ceramic art, as it shows four gladiators and a hunting scene. There is also a large collection of Roman glass in amazingly good condition after all these years.

Colchester was certainly well worth a visit.

Leicester - 21 July

We were welcomed on our arrival in Leicester with tea and biscuits at a local Church where we met our two guides. Having refreshed ourselves, we started our tour at the bridge over the river Soar where it is said that Richard III's spur struck a stone, and a wise woman foretold how his head should be dashed against that same stone.

The earliest stone castle was built in 1107, but little remains of it today. Some remnants can be seen in the hall of the Assize Court which has two Norman windows. In this castle the Barons had a meeting prior to the Magna Carta. In 1264 Simon de Montfort, the last Norman Earl of Leicester, entertained Henry III, and Parliament met here in 1349.

The nearby Church of St Mary de Castro celebrates its 900th anniversary this year. Lancastrian Kings worshipped here, and in 1426 Henry VI was knighted. It is believed that Geoffrey Chaucer was married in this Church also. It has been described as 'the Jewel of Leicester's Churches'. Sir Simon Jenkins refers to its 'superb Norman Chancel and sedilia'.

The Cathedral was formed from St Martin's Church in 1927, so it does not have the wonderful architecture associated with other Cathedrals like Winchester or Salisbury. It is on the site of a Saxon Church and little remains of its Norman successor. Much was built in the 13th, 14th and 15th Centuries. There is a memorial to Richard III.

Nearby we explored one of the best preserved wooden halls in the country, built in the 14th Century. This Guildhall is the City's oldest domestic building still in use. The Great Hall gives a wonderful sense of space, being 62 feet long. Many great events have taken place here – banquets, meetings, and today even weddings. Adjacent to the Hall there is a small police station (with wax occupants!)

After lunch some members visited the Attenborough collection of Picasso ceramics, while others visited the Abbey Pumping Station with four beautifully decorated steam beam engines – rare examples of Victorian engineering. Yet others spent time in the Jewry Wall Museum set in the 2000 year old remains of the Roman town's public baths. This is a superb museum of archaeology following Leicester's history from prehistory to medieval times. The Newarke Houses Museum, recently reopened, has social history galleries and memorabilia of the Leicestershire Regiment. The first gallery illustrates the multi-ethnic population of Leicester today. We were told that in a few years time Leicester will be the first UK town to have more immigrants than people who were born in the UK.

There were several interesting places we were unable to visit, such as Abbey Park with the grave of Cardinal Wolsey, and the National Space Museum. Leicester is well worth another visit.

Ethnic London with Yasha Beresiner - 11 August

The Society members (see Fig. 1) commenced their walk at Bishopsgate, named after the gate to the City. Originally the street was lined with the houses of rich merchants such as Sir Thomas Gresham. We wandered down Catherine Alley to Petticoat Lane/Middlesex

Street which was built in the 17th Century on the grounds of several large country houses, and now forms the border between the City and Tower Hamlets. It gained its more common name from the sellers of old clothes who were often seen there. In the reign of James I Spanish people lived there, but they and the locals were driven out by the Plague in 1665. Later, Huguenot weavers and Jewish traders moved in. By 1750 it was a well established market and trading centre, which it still is today.

By 1774 the Huguenots had their own Church which was later taken over by new immigrants to become Sandy's Row Synagogue in 1854. In the 1870s Ashkenazy Jews arrived and they wanted their own places of worship, and so in five years thirteen new synagogues were built.

We wandered through an alley, once the haunt of Jack the Ripper, through Artillery Passage to Gun Street – names recalling the old Artillery Ground. Here we saw a shop where the Zionist movement started in 1907/08. Further on, past a Huguenot house still standing, we came to a building which was a soup kitchen for the Jewish poor. It served five thousand meals a week and was operating until the 1970s.

Nearby was Christchurch Spitalfields, a grand example of Nicholas Hawksmoor's work. The money for its construction was raised by a tax on coal. It was an important Huguenot Church and many are buried there.

We then came to Fournier Street, once having the homes of affluent Jews and Huguenots. The large attic windows were inserted to ensure the weavers had good light for their work. On the corner of Fournier Street and Brick Lane is Jamme Majid, a mosque for the latest wave of immigrants. The building was built on a chapel for French Protestants in 1742; it was then used by Methodists and later by Jews. Brick Lane, (see Fig. 2) which owes its name to the fact that bricks and tiles were made there, was at one time a completely Jewish quarter with schools and shops. In nearby Princelet Street, again houses were occupied by a succession of immigrants – Huguenots, Jews and Irish.

A very poor Jewish area was centred around Thrawl Street where Nathaniel Rothschild provided money for rehousing the population.

In the 19th Century rich influential people were really trying to help the poor of London in various ways. Canon Samuel Barnett provided education in Toynbee Hall in Commercial Street. From this beginning grew W.E.A. which is still very active today. The Y.H.A. also started in Toynbee Hall.

Our last port of call was the Bevis Marks Synagogue which was unfortunately closed. This is on the site of the town house of the Abbott of Bury St Edmunds, and is said to be the oldest, most active synagogue in Europe.

Again and again we saw how new very poor immigrants, living in wretched conditions, became more prosperous and moved west. Their homes and places of worship were then taken over by the next wave of immigrants.

A most interesting walk in an area few of us know well.

City Churches and Gardens with John Garrod - 5 October

Unfortunately this walk had to be postponed from the 6 September due to a Tube strike, so we were not able to see the gardens in their full glory as the flower beds had been cleared for spring bulbs. However, we had a most interesting tour of City Churches.

St Martin within Ludgate, founded in the 7th Century, was like many City Churches destroyed in the Great Fire of 1666 and rebuilt by Christopher Wren.

One immediately notices the beautiful carving of the dark woodwork, and the artificial bread on the bread shelves. There is a double wooden church warden's seat - a unique feature according to John G. We were assured that the carvers **were** paid, as there was a carved open peapod showing the peas within.

St Vedast Foster Lane, named after a Flemish saint, was rebuilt by Wren in 1670. It was gutted during the Second World War but was rebuilt according to Wren's plans, and is now a very elegant Church. Much of the furniture has come from other Wren Churches. The most notable feature is that the pews are

along the north and south walls, which gives an impression of spaciousness. Behind is a small oasis of peace, a small garden. In the wall of which is a reconstructed piece of Roman mosaic pavement which was found on the site.

St Ann and St Agnes Gresham Street

Like other Churches, this one was also rebuilt by Wren after the Great Fire, and then damaged in 1940. After rebuilding in the 1960s, it is now a Lutheran Church providing services in Latvian and Estonian. One notices the absence of stained glass in the windows and the old pews of dark wood.

St John Zachary Gresham Street

Not all Churches were rebuilt after the Great Fire, and this is one example. It is now a pleasant garden near Goldsmiths' Hall. We noticed 'gold' leopards on pavement posts mirroring the leopard hallmark of the Goldsmiths' Company.

St Mary Aldermanbury Queen Victoria Street

After WWII this Church was demolished, and in 1965-67 was shipped to the USA. It has been re-erected in Westminster College, Fulton, Missouri as a tribute to Winston Churchill. It was in this Church that Churchill delivered his 'iron curtain' speech. At this spot the Church has been replaced by a lovely, carefully planned garden. Here there is a bust of William Shakespeare. The base of the monument commemorates two actors, Condell and Heminge, who in 1623 put the 1st Folio of Shakespeare's plays together. Both men are buried here.

St Lawrence Jewry Gresham Street

Wren's Church was reduced to its walls and tower in 1940, but was rebuilt by Brown in 1954-57. Most of the furniture was donated by City Livery Companies because the Lord Mayor and Aldermen regularly worship here. Hence we saw the seats for the Mayor, his sword bearer and mace bearer, as well as for Aldermen. It was interesting to see the rests for the sword and mace. There are two windows of particular note; one of Sir Thomas More who was a parishioner here, and the other, inserted in 1957, to commemorate Christopher Wren, Grinling Gibbons and Edward Strong (the stonemason).

St Stephen Walbrook This Church, rebuilt by Wren, was said to be famous all over Europe and to be Wren's masterpiece. It was much praised by Lord Burlington and John Wesley. In spite of bomb damage in 1940 the rich 17th Century fittings, font, pulpit, sounding board, altar piece and communion rails all survived. The building has the first dome constructed in the country and predates that of St Paul's according to our guide. Its past minister was Chad Vara who founded the Samaritans.

St Mary Woolnoth Lombard Street

This Church was founded by a Saxon Prince Wulfnoth in 1273, and was also destroyed in the Great Fire. Unlike other City Churches it was rebuilt by Nicholas Hawksmoor in 1726. The interior is superb and is perhaps Hawksmoor's finest. It was 'restored' by William Butterfield in 1875-76 by removing the galleries and then attaching their fronts to the walls. He also cut down the high pews and lowered the pulpit. It lies above six Tube lines and so was in danger of demolition. However, it was underpinned and saved. Between 1780 and 1807, John Newton, an ex slave-trader and friend of William Wilberforce, was minister here. He composed several well known hymns, including *Amazing Grace*. As this year celebrates the abolition of slavery, there was a model of a memorial to be erected in the near future in Hyde Park to the memory of the many slaves who died or who were transported to America. It was a boat shaped area of gravel, on which was placed a model of a part of a slave ship.

Thomas Guy who founded Guys Hospital was a book-seller nearby. Edward Lloyd who owned the Coffee Shop in which Lloyds of London began was also a parishioner here. Both men are buried here.

George Peabody Statue Royal Exchange

This statue was erected in 1869 to commemorate the American philanthropist who built homes for the worthy poor. He was the only American to be buried in Westminster Abbey. However, he did not stay there long, as it was discovered that he had expressed a wish to be buried in the USA. The town chosen for his internment is called Peabody in his honour.

St Margaret Lothbury Once again another Church rebuilt by Wren and full of 17th Century woodwork from demolished Wren Churches e.g. the pulpit with its elaborate sounding board. It even has a **stone** font carved by Gibbons. Of special mention are the two sword rests – well worth a photograph!

Ironmonger Lane – once the home area of ironmongers. At the Cheapside corner is the house where Thomas Becket was born in 1119. Nearby is the Hall of the Mercers' Company, built on the site of a hospital founded by a sister of Becket. Their father was a member of the Mercers' Company.

St Mary Le Bow Cheapside – famous for its Bells and 11th Century crypt. This was gutted by incendiaries and rebuilt after WWII. It is a light church with stained glass and a beautiful rood screen donated by Oberammergau. There are two pulpits as the Church often hosts debates. In one corner is the Norwegian Chapel, as the resistance members tuned into Bow Bells during the war. There is a statue in the garden to Captain John Smith, a copy of the statue in Jamestown, Virginia, where he became Governor. Captain Phillips, who became Governor of Australia, is also associated with this Church.

We had a most interesting day in the autumn sunshine and are looking forward to a similar walk next year.



Martin Cartwright

Fig. 1 – Society members at St Botolph's Church, Aldgate



Martin Cartwright

Fig. 2 – Brick lane