

## SOCIETY OUTINGS 2015

Organised and Reported by Sue Holt *et alii*

### Dr Samuel Johnson's London - 14 April

On a perfect spring day our group gathered in Gough Square, just to the north of Fleet Street, beside the statue of 'Hodge' who was described by Samuel Johnson as 'a very fine cat indeed'. Here our guide introduced the walk by telling us about Dr Johnson's House, facing us in Gough Square. This house is a lucky survivor of the London Blitz where Samuel Johnson lived for nine years (1748-1759) and where he compiled his *Dictionary* (published 1755). Johnson lived in seventeen different houses in London but only this property survives and has been restored to the state that Johnson would have known when he lived there.

Our next stop was Wine Office Court, where traders came to buy licences to sell wine, which was the home of Oliver Goldsmith (author of *The Vicar of Wakefield* and *She Stoops to Conquer*) and a friend of Johnson's. Goldsmith once had to be rescued from the bailiffs, by the quick action of Johnson taking one of Goldsmith's manuscripts to his own printer and sell it to pay off Goldsmith's debts. We learnt that such generosity to his friends and servants was typical of Johnson, who gave away the majority of his earnings from writing over the years and lived in relative poverty all his life.

Crossing Shoe Lane, currently surrounded by enormous building works, we walked down to Farringdon Street. When Johnson came to London at the age of 27 this was still the Fleet River (actually an open sewer). The river was covered over into an underground channel in two stages during Johnson's lifetime, in 1737 as far as the Fleet Bridge (now Ludgate Circus) creating the Fleet Market, and in 1769 all the way to the new Blackfriars Bridge creating New Bridge Street. Just to the north east of Ludgate Circus we noted the site of Fleet Prison which was a debtors' prison, originally built in 1197, rebuilt three times and finally demolished in 1846. We heard how in Johnson's time there was a window grille which opened onto Farringdon Street where destitute debtors could beg for food from passers-by.

Up steps and then up Ludgate Hill to the impressive Stationers Hall; the present building dates from 1887 but has been restored after bomb damage. Until 1911 all books published had to be registered there. There is a plaque to Wynkyn de Worde on the wall of the Hall to commemorate the setting up of the first printing press in Fleet Street in 1500.

A stroll through the modern Paternoster Square brought us to the re-sited Temple Bar which would have been a familiar sight to Johnson in its former position in the Strand. Passing the statue of Queen Anne outside St Paul's Cathedral we were told that Johnson, who was a lifelong sufferer from scrofula, sought a cure from the touch of the queen, as the monarch's touch was thought to be a remedy for this disease.

Passing St Brides Church and through Hanging Sword Alley, where fencing masters advertised their trade by hanging swords outside their premises, we reached the relative peace of the Inner Temple, one of the four Inns of Court. Johnson lived at No. 1 Inner Temple Lane after leaving Gough Square. His friend and biographer James Boswell also had lodgings in the Inner Temple so as to be close to him. Back into busy Fleet Street we walked west to the Strand, pausing at Twinning's Tea Shop (opened 1706) to learn that Johnson was a great tea drinker and often frequented this shop. The Tea shop started out as a coffee shop but soon turned to serving tea instead. Apparently Johnson was so fond of tea that he could drink up to 22 (small) cups at a single sitting! The western limit of our walk was St Clement Dane's Church, where Johnson worshipped, to see the memorial statue to Johnson which also has cameos of his friends Mrs. Thrale and Boswell. We finished our tour eastwards along the Strand and Fleet Street to Bolt Court, very close to our starting point in Gough Square, where Johnson died in 1784 at the age of 75.

This was an illuminating tour of the western edges of the City of London through the inspiration of an eighteenth century man of letters.

Jane Shemilt

## Medieval London - 7 May

We met at the Monument to the Great Fire of London, designed by Sir Christopher Wren. The 311 steps can be climbed for the sum of £3.00, but our tour commenced by walking the short distance towards the river Thames to visit St Magnus the Martyr Church. Looking across the Thames from the entrance to the Church, to your right is the modern London Bridge, but in a direct line is the site of its more famous predecessor. Inside the Church is a model of the old London Bridge. Like many other London churches, St Magnus was seriously damaged during the Second World War, but was restored in the 1950s and carries on as a working church today. Leaving the church and then along the embankment we passed Old Billingsgate Market. This Victorian building was originally Billingsgate Fish Market. The original market was built in 1850, moving fish trading off the streets. The current building dates from the 1870s and is now used as an events venue. It is a beautiful building best viewed from the south bank of the Thames.

Next, past the HM Revenue and Customs (Customs House) we turned away from the Thames to emerge onto Lower Thames Street. A short walk towards the Tower of London brought us to the church of All Hallows by the Tower. This church was also extensively damaged by bombs in WW2 and has been completely restored. The church was built on the site of a Roman building and the crypt houses a museum where traces can be seen, including a well preserved mosaic floor.

Leaving the church and towards the Tower of London we then crossed the road and passed through Trinity Square Gardens noting the memorial to the Merchant Navy and Fishing Fleets 1914-1918. We walked along Muscovy Street and Seething Lane to reach the Church of St Olav in Hart Street. Here a rehearsal for a lunchtime (free) concert was just coming to an end, and as we were a group we were treated to a talk about the church by one of the Friends. This included being shown a bricked up door at first floor level, which formally gave access to a gallery where Samuel Pepys and his family worshiped. Pepys Street is just off Seething Lane. We exited the Church on the opposite side to Hart St into a lovely restored garden. Finally we made our way to Leaden Hall Market to see the wonderful Victorian iron work.

Alan Morris

## Brentford - 9 June

We met our two guides at Brentford Lock, and set off along the Grand Union Canal which was begun in 1792 by King George III who lived at Kew Palace just across the river from Brentford. He wanted to create a navigable canal from Braunstone in Oxfordshire to the Thames at Brentford to move goods more quickly. This was a distance of 230 miles and was completed in 1805.

Along the canal we noted the last of the 'overhanging warehouses' which enable barges to be unloaded without goods being damaged by bad weather. A narrow boat was moored alongside - these boats were called 'Monkey' boats after a Thomas Monk who designed them.

On route from the canal to the Great West Road we learned a little about Brentford's early history. The earliest date mentioned was 100 AD when the Romans planned a road from London to Silchester (Hampshire) in the west and the place they chose as a crossing place was Brentford.

Before construction of the Great West Road all traffic went through Brentford High Street which was eventually deemed 'intolerable'. The situation led to a Parliamentary Commission in 1909 who drew up plans for a by-pass in 1912, but which were put on hold until after the war. In 1918, as a means of employing returning soldiers, work was started and the Great West Road was opened in 1925 by King George V and Queen Mary.

From the Great West Road we walked to The Butts residential area passing Brentford Library which was given money in 1905 by Andrew Carnegie as part of his charitable foundation. The Butts is so called because this was originally the place in the 14th century where men came to practice archery - which was law in those times - on a Sunday. They used to practice with a beer barrel on end which is why archery targets are shaped the way they are today. King Charles I soldiers stabled their horses in the Butts on the way to the Battle of Turnham Green in November 1642, and a number of martyrs in the reign of Mary I were burnt there.

The end of the walk led us through Brentford Docks which are now in a poor condition and scheduled for redevelopment. Originally the Docks were responsible for 10% of all exports but declined in the 1960s due to containerisation.

Back at Brentford Lock we were delighted to see a local resident - 'George' the local heron. It made a pleasing end to a really interesting walk.

Cally Mason

## Romsey and Houghton Lodge – 7 July

The first stop on our coach trip to Hampshire was the small market town of Romsey, on the River Test, a few miles north of Southampton. In the Tourist Office the friendly staff provided us with information and also sturdy hessian bags bearing a picture of Romsey Abbey! We then explored the town itself; some went first to the medieval King John's House (originally a hunting lodge) which still has medieval wall decorations and graffiti, and a floor made from animal bones.

At 11 o'clock we met at the Abbey for a guided tour. The Abbey volunteer ladies were very knowledgeable and helpful. The town grew up to serve the Saxon nunnery founded in 907AD by King Edward the Elder. His daughter, Elfleda, became the first abbess. There was probably a wooden church on the site, followed by a stone building in 1000AD. After this time the nunnery followed the Rule of St Benedict, which continued until the Dissolution in 1539. The Abbey church was saved from destruction by the efforts of four 'Guardians' of the parish, who persuaded Henry VIII's commissioners to sell the north aisle (used as a parish church) to the town for £100 for their continued use.

There are many memorials to famous people in the Abbey, such as Lord Palmerston, the Victorian Prime Minister, and Sir William Petty, founder member of The Royal Society and friend of Pepys. The most poignant memorial is that of Earl Mountbatten of Burma, which is much visited.

After lunch, we Romsey for the six mile journey to Houghton Lodge and Gardens, near Stockbridge. The Lodge is known as a 'Cottage Ornée', an example of the genre of 'picturesque' Gothic architecture, popular with 18th century noblemen with a taste for the rural life. We were shown around the house by the owner and his wife, and were then at liberty to explore the formal and informal extensive grounds and wander along the banks of the River Test, not forgetting the resident Alpacas, Tom, Dick and Harry. We finished the day with a welcome tea and homemade cakes.

Anne Lamb

## Leicester and Richard III – 8 August

On arrival in Leicester our guide led the way into the Cathedral Gardens where standing by the statue of Richard III, he gave us a brief history of the Cathedral Church of St Martin's. Our split into two groups, one taking a guided tour of the historical city centre while the other went to the new Richard III Visitor Centre.

The building housing the Visitor Centre stands on the site of the former Friary of the Greyfriars where Richard had been buried after his death at the Battle of Bosworth. The Centre chronicles the life and times of Richard in detail and makes good use of visual and interactive displays. Twenty-first century technology helps to tell the story of Richard's life and the remarkable search and identification of his remains. On the way out Richard's grave can be seen in-situ under a glass floor.

After leaving the Visitor Centre I walked through the gardens to the Cathedral. A church has stood on this site since Saxon times, it was rebuilt by the Normans in 1086. The spire was added in 1862. What we see today is mostly a Victorian restoration. I noticed the nave had a hammer-beam roof. The side chapels were dedicated to St Katherine, St Dunstan and St George. King Richard III was reinterred in the Cathedral on the 26 March 2015. His tomb lies facing the altar and is made of Swaledale fossil stone, quarried in North Yorkshire. A deep cross cut into the stone allows light from the magnificent stained glass East window to flood through it, symbolising life after death.

On our guided walk we stopped at the Guildhall which was built around 1390 as the meeting place of the Guild of Corpus Christi. Over the years the building had become increasingly dilapidated and by the 1920s there were plans for it to be demolished. After extensive restoration it is now a Grade 1 listed timber framed building. We walked down Southgate to the Church of St Mary de Castro. The church was first built as the chapel of Leicester Castle in 1107. Later the church served the nobility of the castle and a second church was built for the parishioners was built alongside. In the 1200s as more space was needed the churches merged to create the two aisles we see today. A unique feature of the church is the freestanding bell tower. After the walk we gathered in the Gardens before heading for home.

Jan Long