

## SOCIETY OUTINGS 2017

### Organised and Reported by Society Members

#### London Guildhall – 27 April

The Guildhall is the only secular stone structure dating from before 1666 still standing in the City. It has been the City of London's town hall since at least the 15th century and is still the ceremonial and administrative centre of the City of London and its Corporation. It lies to the north of Gresham Street on the site of the Roman amphitheatre and probable site of an Anglo-Saxon 'gild-hall' ('gild' meaning payment) where citizens came to pay their taxes. It is thought that the Anglo-Saxon building was sited here due to the amphitheatre's remains. Most of the amphitheatre lies beneath Guildhall Yard but partial remains are on public display in the basement of Guildhall Art Gallery. An archaeological excavation in 2000 found the remains of the great 13th century gatehouse which was built directly over the southern entrance to the Roman amphitheatre. The first documentary reference to a London Guildhall is dated 1128.

Our group assembled in Guildhall Yard, with the medieval hall flanked by the 1960s west wing and the 1990s Guildhall Art Gallery, and were met by our City of London guide. We entered the complex through the modern west wing where our guide explained that the medieval building was built between 1411 and 1440, but that only the walls survive as there have been four roofs of the Great Hall over the life of the building. The original roof was destroyed in the Fire of London in 1666 and replaced in 1670 with a flat roof. The building was restored again in 1866 by the City of London architect Sir Horace Jones, who added a new timber roof in close keeping with the original hammer beam roof. This replacement was destroyed during a Luftwaffe fire-raid on the night of 29/30 December 1940, together with extensive damage to the interior of the building and the loss of the original stained glass windows. The current impressive timber roof, designed by Sir Giles Gilbert Scott, was erected during the restoration works in 1953. The extremely ornate grand entrance to the Guildhall (the east wing of the south front) in 'Hindustani Gothic' style was added in 1788 by George Dance (and restored in 1910).

We made our way into the Great Hall which was laid out in preparation for the Court of Common Council to be held that afternoon. Above the entrance to the hall stand the massive and fearsome figures of the City's guardians, the giants Gog and Magog. The early versions of these statues were destroyed in the Great Fire in 1666 and replaced by wickerwork effigies that had to be replaced in the 19th century as they had been eaten away by mice! These Victorian figures were destroyed in the Blitz and the current carvings were carved by David Evans in 1953 and given to the City of London by Alderman Sir George Wilkinson, who had been Lord Mayor in 1940 at the time of the destruction of the previous versions. We learned how to tell the difference between the giants, Gog carries a spiked ball on a pole as a weapon and Magog a poleaxe. The stained glass windows in the Great Hall, post-war replacements, show the name of every Lord Mayor of London and the monarch in whose reign they served. The banners of the Great Twelve Livery Companies hang in the Great Hall and shields bearing the arms of all the 107 Livery Companies of the City are displayed around the roof of the Hall. It was explained that these Livery Companies arose from the mediaeval guilds which governed the standards and controlled the apprenticeship systems for their trades and professions as well as providing charitable relief for their members and their families. The livery was the name for the uniform they wore to identify which guild they were from. The Livery Companies still have an important role in the City and in charitable work. The Great Hall contains memorials to great heroes of the nation, Sir Winston Churchill, Lord Horatio Nelson and the Duke of Wellington, and also to important political figures that influenced the commerce of the City, William Pitt the Elder, William Pitt the Younger and William Beckford. Many famous trials have been held in the Great Hall, including those of Lady Jane Grey and her husband Lord Guildford Dudley, Thomas Cranmer and one of the members of the Gunpowder Plot (Henry Garnet). The infamous case of mass killing of 133 African slaves by the crew of the slave ship Zong in the days following 29 November 1781, which had a profound effect

upon public opinion to the transatlantic slave trade, was also heard here.

From the Great Hall we moved into the entrance porch where the mediaeval interior is still visible despite the exterior being remodelled in the late 18th century. The stone vaulted ceiling retains the bosses with symbols of the evangelists and the arms of Henry IV. Next we were led down into the mediaeval crypt, not usually open to the public. The West Crypt was filled with debris after the Fire of London and remained blocked until restored in the 1950s, and provided with a series of stained glass windows depicting the Livery Companies. The East Crypt may be part of a late-13th century building and retains its impressive stone vaulting and Purbeck marble pillars. It has also has stained glass windows, replaced post-war, depicting famous Londoners.

After ascending from the crypts we were shown through the Old Print Room, where prints and maps used to be kept, the Mayor's Parlour, which has a barrel vaulted wooden roof designed by Sir Horace Jones as part of the 1866 restoration, and the Old Library which also retains its 19th century wooden roof and which housed the City of London Library until damaged in 1940. It was restored for use as a reception room, and the library moved to its current location in the modern west wing in the 1960s. The Old Library now has stained glass windows representing City dignitaries connected with the printing and publishing of books, and houses tapestries which originally hung in the Mansion House.

Altogether this was an illuminating insight into the history of a mediaeval building still maintaining its original function in the heart of the modern City of London.

Jane Shemilt

## **Jewish London - 17 May**

We met Rachel Kolsky, our guide, at the Bishopsgate exit of Liverpool Street Station for our tour of the Jewish East End of London. After crossing Bishopsgate and walking down Middlesex Street, a quiet spot was found to give us a potted history of Anglo Jewry.

The story began with the invitation from William I for Jews to establish money lending, but gradually increasing discrimination led to their expulsion in 1290. Oliver Cromwell allowed

the Jews to return in 1656 followed by various waves of Jews escaping persecution in Northern Europe, Russia and Nazi Germany.

From Middlesex Street, we progressed to Brune Street via Frying Pan Alley, where we were told us how smelly it would have been with brewing, the leather trade, a salmon smokery and fruit and vegetable markets all close by. In Brune Street we were shown the Jewish Soup Kitchen, with its separate doors for in and out. The original soup kitchen was founded in Leman Street in 1854 and later operated in Black Lion Yard and Fashion Street before moving to Brune Street in 1902 (year 5662 in Hebrew). After World War II, the kitchen operated a 'meals on wheels' service for the elderly before finally closing in 1990.

Opposite the soup kitchen is the former site of The Jewish Free School, largely funded by the Rothschild family. By the early 1900s this had become the largest in Europe with over 4,000 pupils. The school was evacuated to Ely during WWII and was then re-established in Camden in 1958, before moving to Kenton in 2002. The uniform is still in the Rothschild's family colours of royal blue and gold.

We then moved on to Fashion Street, (surprisingly not named after the garment trade but after the Fossan brothers who built it in the mid 17th century). On one side of the street is an imposing building in the style of a Moorish Bazaar, which was built in 1905 by Abraham Davis for the local street vendors. Unfortunately the building was not a success as the traders preferred trading on the street and so the building became a wholesale market, which remained until its recent renovation. Epra Fabrics, which is the last remaining Jewish Textile business, is sited where Fashion Street joins Brick Lane.

At one time there were 125,000 Jews living in the area, served by 65 Synagogues, but as the Jews became more prosperous they started to live further out, typically to the north, although their businesses remained in the area. However, by 1970 most businesses had gone.

Even before 1970 the character of the area began to change as Bengali men started arriving in the 1940s and through to the late 1960s, and in the 1970s the Bengali men began to arrive with their wives and children. (Walking north up Brick Lane, Rachel pointed out several decorated

manhole covers, which she considers works of art!) On the corner of Brick Lane and Fournier Street is the Jamme Masjid Mosque. The building was originally built as a chapel for the Huguenots, but in 1898 became the Spitalfields Great Synagogue.

We carried on up Brick Lane to Princelet Street, from where the old Truman brewery is visible. Here our guide recommended what she considers to be the best bagel shop in London is nearby, Beigel Bake at 159 Brick Lane. Along Princelet Street, many of the old houses date from the 1700s. Turning left into Wilkes Street it was mentioned that in the 1970s and 80s the houses were still mainly owned by Jewish families who no longer lived in them but were unable to sell them. Now they are worth millions as they are so close to the City of London business district!

Then we walked through Spitalfields Market, before crossing Brushfield Street and down Gun Street, past the Ottolenghi Spitalfields restaurant (another of our guide's recommendations). We then turned right along Artillery Lane and left into Sandys Row where our guide had arranged for our group to visit the Synagogue. Again this had been built as a Huguenot chapel but is now one of the only four remaining synagogues in the area.

I greatly enjoyed this walk and I hope some more of our members will follow the route detailed above and discover this fascinating area for themselves.

Alan Morris

## **Royal Courts of Justice - 13 July**

We were met by our guide at reception in the spacious main hall of the Royal Courts of Justice from where he took us first to Court Four, the home of the Lord Chief Justice. Here we heard an interesting and informative talk on the history of the courts and its procedures, before moving on to our tour of the building.

The idea of such a court was first suggested in the 1840s but no action was taken until the 1860s when an architectural competition was held to submit plans. The winning architect was George Edmund Street who was primarily an ecclesiastical architect and this influence was obvious throughout the building. Unfortunately

Street died in 1881 before the work was finished and it was his son Arthur who completed the project in time for the Courts to be opened by Queen Victoria in 1882. The statistics give an indication of the scale of the project: the buildings now house 80 courts, 150 judges, 1,000 staff, six and a half miles of corridors, and nine cells which are no longer in use.

The background to the different functions of the Courts was then explained. It is the home of the High Court, which has three divisions: Chancery (financial matters), Queen's Bench and Family. There are no criminal trials so no jury trials. We were made aware of some of the fine architectural features of Court Four with its ornate carving and minstrels' gallery where the great and good used to sit. The roles of some of the court officials were then explained such as the stenographer and the usher in charge of all the different holy books for witnesses taking the oath. A green light showing on the desk indicates the proceedings are being recorded while a red light means that they are in camera and not being recorded.

Our tour of the building reinforced the ecclesiastical feel of the architecture. In the Crypt we saw four decorated columns which contrasted strongly with the other columns, which were plain as Street had intended. The decoration was down to migrant European stonemasons having been employed by Street to replace striking British masons. They had to sleep overnight in the Crypt to avoid the risk of being attacked out on the streets; so to while away the time they decorated some of the columns. Another column, the Floating Column, had a deliberate fault inserted by Street because he believed no building could be perfect as only God was perfect.

The only decorated room was the Painted Room which reflected the style of William Morris and Pugin. From here we went on to the Bear Garden, so called by Queen Victoria as a result of all the noise generated in this open area when the lawyers met their clients.

We then returned through the maze of corridors to finish our tour at a small museum. We certainly had enjoyed a most informative morning thanks to the extensive knowledge of our enthusiastic guide.

Susan Toms