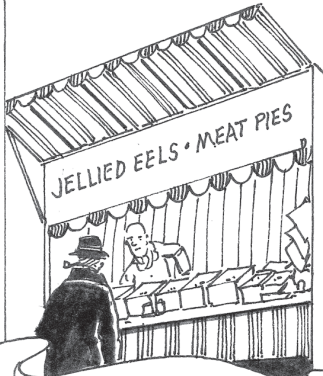
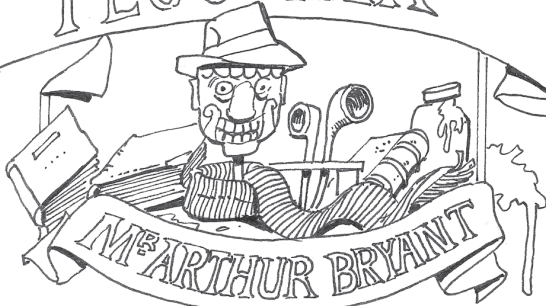


PECULIAR



EAST END

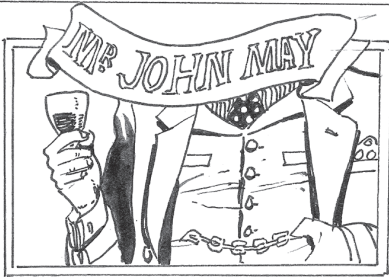


SAUCY LADIES



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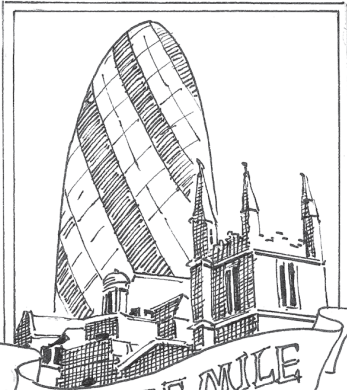
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LONDON



WEST END



SQUARE MILE



UNSAVOURY CHARACTERS

Keith Page

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INTRODUCTION BY DCI JOHN MAY, PECULIAR CRIMES UNIT, LONDON

In all our years of crime detection in the UK capital there was only ever one main suspect: London itself.

Over the centuries the city shaped its residents, making them who they are. My partner, Arthur Bryant, knew this and used his knowledge of its sixty thousand streets to solve the unlikeliest crimes.

Before tragedy struck during our inquiry into the London Bridge murders, Mr Bryant wrote many volumes of memoirs. I wouldn't say they were popular but they were certainly different. His final volume was to be about the city in which he grew up. He treated it as an investigation, interviewing witnesses, taking testimonies from experts, gathering evidence to make his case over a number of years and finally enlisting my help to sort out the hopeless mess he'd made.

When I was clearing his medicinal herbs out of the evidence room I found a cardboard box containing the London files. Most consisted of old cassette recordings. The first challenge was finding anything that could play them. There were also some documents submitted by colleagues and friends. After cleaning them up – they were sticky, heaven knows with what – I realized that they constituted a personal, unreliable portrait of London, a tapestry with parts missing or altered, sewn together by my oldest friend.

There are new threads to be added every day. The story of London will never be finished. What follows are just a few dropped stitches.

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THE PECULIAR CRIMES UNIT

The Old Warehouse
231 Caledonian Road
London N1 9RB

A MESSAGE FROM UNIT CHIEF RAYMOND LAND

Hello there.

As the Chief of the Peculiar Crimes Unit, London's oldest specialist police division, I've been asked to say a few words about this volume. First, I'd like to point out that it's completely useless.

I thought it was some kind of guidebook but it's nothing of the kind. There's bugger all in here about what ordinary people want to do when they visit London, viz.: go to the London Eye, Big Ben and M&M'S World before sitting through the first half of *Les Mis*. Instead it's full of annoying conversations and weird historical connections no one's interested in. Half of them have no point and the other half go wandering off at a tangent, like Mr Bryant's mind. There are hundreds of perfectly acceptable London books knocking about and this isn't one of them. It's just someone randomly banging on about a lot of pointless, forgotten stuff.

Now, I respect my detectives Arthur Bryant and John May, partly because it looks bad if you're rude about old people. They've spent

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decades in this great metropolis solving proper crimes while the local constabulary have been busy arresting gentlemen for relaxing themselves in the neighbourhood's explicit cinemas and attacking each other with kitchen knives because the little bags they sell have been cut with Cillit Bang, but that doesn't suddenly make them experts on London. Skimming this book, it's clear that no lessons have been learned. Who cares about creepy alleyways and freezing churches? If I want to feel numb inside I'll visit my ex-wife.

Mr Bryant doesn't seem to have fact-checked half of it and there are no bloody photos. What's the point of a book about London that doesn't have a few generic copyright-free shots lifted off the internet? And all this stuff about pubs. A boozier is a place for a Scotch egg and knocking back a few pints, not trying to find out the last time Samuel Pepys was in. There are too many London 'characters', the kind who prided themselves on being bohemian just because they got chucked out of saloons and dropped dead in Soho gutters before hitting thirty.

It's not as if Mr Bryant didn't have crimes to solve instead of running his 'Peculiar London' Walking Tours in the evenings. For some unimaginable reason people paid a few quid to follow him about in the cold, staring at brickwork and statues of blokes in silly wigs. I've seen him in action, doing all the voices and waving his hands at a group of easily duped French people as if hypnotizing them.

When people start talking about their hobbies in the office you know they're not working hard enough, a dilemma Mr Bryant solved by making work his hobby. He swears that he cracks cases by studying the history of London, which is a bit like saying you can tell the time by taking the clock to bits. What's wrong with the tried-and-tested method of arresting first and asking questions later? There's many a lad I've led up from the overnight cells with a bruise across the bridge of his nose who's ready to spill the beans on his mates, I can tell you.

Mr Bryant says who better to know about the city's dark side than a copper, but my rule of thumb is: if you know something disgusting about London keep it to yourself and certainly don't mention it on speed dates.

I was off sick when we did history so I don't know a lot about it, but I do know that Mr Bryant's version of London's history is

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gibberish. He rewrites the past to incorporate his dreams or things he wishes had happened when they patently did not. And he dwells on what's not there more than what's left. I tell him, you can't live in the past, not when the rest of us are stuck in the present. It would help if he put his thoughts in some kind of order instead of behaving like the bloke who sits in the corner of the Dog and Duck telling everyone why his wife paid to have him killed.

And somehow he managed to drag his partner into this enterprise. I thought John May had more sense; he's the one who always knows which phone tariff he's on and how to split restaurant bills on an app. He's asked me to say something nice. Well, this book is not for you if you're the kind of person who likes Clarice Cliff ceramics and logging departure times at railway stations. I like detail and order and practicality. I do not enjoy whimsy, conjecture or people who call me Raymondo.

If you're still planning to read this volume of rambling conversations with half-mad friends, good luck to you. I reckon it's your last chance to dodge a bullet but what do I know, I'm only the unit chief. You're big enough to look after yourselves. Don't come complaining to me; I live in a world of strangers where a novelty doughnut costs four quid and nothing makes sense any more.

I suppose Mr Bryant has managed to reflect both himself and London, in that his account is annoying, all over the place, and occasionally apocryphal.

Anyway, 'enjoy the book'.

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I

A BIG LUMP OF ROCK & OTHER STORIES

ARTHUR BRYANT: If history consists of what you can remember, I'm bugged.

I had my glasses in my hand a minute ago and now they've gone. And I've put a bag of chips down somewhere. I'm up in the PCU's evidence room, where we keep the impounded booze and my notes on London. I say notes. Not everything is legible. We have mice.

For years my walking tours around the capital were simply an evening job attended by retired archivists, socially awkward loners and the kind of people who shout about Jesus in public. They required me to argue with strangers, something I previously had little interest in doing if it didn't involve arresting them.

Rather than let this lot go to waste I decided to share it with you on a sort of virtual tour. I don't actually know what a 'virtual' tour is. John May tried explaining it but my attention drifted when he said 'online'. By the time he got to the metaverse I was sound asleep. He set me up on a Zoom call with Scotland Yard last week but I somehow ended up on a Welsh radio programme about knitting.

I can't compete with the kind of passionate historians who know how many double-decker buses you can fit into the Albert Hall, but I'll be making some connections that may take you by surprise. They certainly took me by surprise, not always in a good way.

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Let's see if I can get this thing working. I found a cassette recorder up here that used to belong to one of the Kray twins. I erased the old tapes; you don't want to listen to some bloke screaming for two hours.

London was established by the Romans as a trading centre and that's what it still is. Almost everything else is based around ceremony and entertainment. You won't find anything here about the Little Venice Dragon Boat Pageant, the Bethnal Green Morris Dancers, the Bastille Day Waiters' Race or the Dagenham Girl Pipers, who for some unearthly reason became the punchline to many London jokes. A lot of the ceremonial events that take place in London occur in various forms around the globe, so they're not covered. The only fun thing about Trooping the Colour is waiting for guards to pass out on hot days, and you can read about Westminster Abbey anywhere (although I bet not everyone knows it's a 'Royal Peculiar', meaning it belongs to the reigning monarch and not the Church). I'm more interested in exploring the obscure and unique. And I'm not sticking in loads of addresses. If you want those you can use the Googly-thing on your phone.

Now, your first question might be: why London?

It was the heart of the British Empire, the largest and wealthiest colonial power on the planet. There are only twenty-two countries in the world that we *didn't* invade. This expansion began in the 1600s and didn't come to a final end until 1997, when Hong Kong was handed back to China. So it makes sense to set our focus here.

The first thing you notice in Central London is the variety of buildings dating from so many different eras. When you wish to dignify a new town you first construct some municipal buildings based on classical Greek and Roman ideals. That's why there are still so many boring government offices that look like temples. Whitehall is a civil servants' Xanadu of Corinthian pillars and white stone pediments, especially when seen from across the lake in St James's Park. But grand buildings aren't enough to make you respect politicians. 'The higher the buildings the lower the morals,' said Noël Coward with some prescience. They don't build mock temples any more. They commission global architects to design giant glass willies.

Three things transformed London: the Reformation, the Great Fire, the railways and the Blitz.

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JOHN MAY: That's four things, Arthur.

ARTHUR BRYANT: You're not on yet, John. Wait for your cue.

Actually there's another thing, the revolt of the Iceni, but London as such didn't really exist that far back.

JOHN MAY: So, five things. And you have to hold both those keys down to record.

ARTHUR BRYANT: I've used a cassette player before. Believe it or not, I was once a big fan of new technology.

JOHN MAY: How am I only just hearing this? Why did you stop?

ARTHUR BRYANT: I bought the K-Tel Bottle Cutter and nearly severed my lips. Let's push on.

For me there is always a gap between what you read about a city and what you feel when you walk around it. I shall attempt to bridge that gap. I've assembled these observations with the help of my partner here, Mr John May, who took out some of the stuff that didn't exist and removed the more libellous remarks so that I wouldn't get attacked in public again.

The problem with London is its past.

Even though we often show a shocking disregard for it, it gets in the way of everything. We still build along the routes of ancient hedgerows and riverbeds, and our homes still follow Victorian principles even though the way we live has radically changed in the last seventy years. Our buildings have been repurposed, rebuilt, retouched and replaced. Look to the higher floors in Oxford Street and Tottenham Court Road and you may find a rococo plaster palace surviving above a hollowed-out discount-clothing store.

Nothing about the foundation of London is certifiably true. It's said that nine centuries before Christ, the leprous wolf-lord Bladur was the first British monarch to die in an aviation accident when his wings came off over the settlement of London. I don't entirely buy the story myself.

A better starting point for all this is the London Stone.

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Until recently it sat behind a grille on Cannon Street in London's Square Mile, an unprepossessing lump of oolitic limestone about three feet wide. It had earlier been wedged somewhere on Candlewick Street, now gone, and had been blessed by Brutus himself, except that's just a legend. Brutus certainly didn't say, 'While this stone is protected London shall flourish,' because apart from the fact that he spoke Latin why would he? It's manufactured history retro-fitted for convenience, a nice little legend that adds a touch of colour.

But the London Stone did have some significance. It might have been a milestone from the Roman Forum, used to measure distances from the capital. Perhaps it was brought on a ship to symbolically found London, although it's more likely that it came from here. It was certainly mentioned in the twelfth century. Did it once exist as a Roman pillar rather than a crumb of rock? It doesn't seem to have got any smaller since. And did the rebel Jack Cade really strike his stick on it during the fifteenth-century's biggest protest, Cade's Rebellion? Cade ended up being dragged through the streets and quartered, which was what happened back then if you complained about corruption in local government.

So, why have we bothered to hang on to an ugly, insignificant lump of rock of obscure origin? The truth is, we simply don't know. Over time, the London Stone became an object upon which to project our own ideas about the city. And like so much else in London, it survives unnoticed and barely commented upon.

Tenure of the Stone passed with the ownership of the land on which it stood for nearly three hundred years, the site of St Swithin's Church. Its final guardian was not Chaucer's 'parfit gentil knight' but the branch manager of WHSmith, the newsagent's shop that occupied the property. He probably let customers touch it if they bought a copy of *Razzle* and a Galaxy bar.

But there are other such objects dotted around the city. There's a huge polished stone outside University College Hospital off Tottenham Court Road that nobody venerates, yet here are sick people entering a house of healing: why don't they stroke it for luck? It's the people who decide what to honour; governments can't force us. If we think something has a bit of history behind it, just an odd anecdote, we're more likely to fight for its survival.

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Yet even when I poke about in the past I can't truly know what it was like to be there. No two experiences of London are the same and any attempt to convey their fullness is doomed to failure. A timeline of Soho will take you from hunters' marshlands to rowdy coffee houses and walking its streets will give you a sense of its geography, but little can recapture its zeitgeist. The political, literary, gastro-nomic and artistic characters who lived there have nearly all gone, leaving behind a neighbourhood of ghosts.

I'm always surprised how little people know about the mythical foundation of London. Romulus and Remus may have founded Rome but we have two rather sinister giants, Gog and Magog, to thank for London. Early in every November there's a chance to see the wicker men themselves at the annual Lord Mayor's show.

Gog and Magog are sometimes called Gogmagog and Corineus. They're descended from a race of pagan giants. The story goes that the Roman Emperor Diocletian had thirty-three wicked daughters. He managed to find thirty-three husbands to 'curb their unruly ways'* (I love the sweeping generalizations of these myths), but the daughters were not pleased and, under the leadership of their eldest sister Alba, they plotted to cut the throats of their husbands as they slept.

For this crime they were set adrift in a boat with half a year's rations – clearly it was a pretty big boat or they were light eaters – and following a horrible journey they arrived at the island that came to be named Albion, after the eldest. Here they stayed, and with 'the assistance of demons'† (we're not told which ones) they populated the wild, windswept land with a race of giants. I imagine these are the same ones Beowulf tackled in his epic poem.

Some time later Brutus, the great-grandson of Aeneas, fled the fall of Troy and eventually arrived at the same islands. He also named them for himself, so we now know them as Britain. With him he

* The Gigantick History of the two famous Giants, and other curiosities in Guildhall, London (volume 1), 1741

† Ibid.

brought his top champion, Corineus, who faced the leader of the giants in a massive one-on-one bundle and chucked him from a high cliff to his death.

The giant's name was Gogmagog and the rock from which he was thrown became known as Langnagog, or the 'Giant's Leap'. There's a general idea that this was at Plymouth Hoe, in the south. As a reward Corineus was given the western part of the island, which came to be called Cornwall after him. Brutus travelled to the east and founded the city of New Troy, which we know as London.

The tale slings up more questions than I can answer. When did Gogmagog switch from one creature into two separate giants? Why do they have such little legs? And why do we always venerate losers? (Boadicea, Eddie the Eagle, Boris Johnson.)

The full story can be found in Geoffrey of Monmouth's twelfth century *Historia Regum Britanniae*, a loopy history that knits Celtic royalty into the heroic world of the Greek myth via the old Welsh legend of King Arthur.

We know it's mostly rubbish because the fall of Troy was around 1,180 BCE, long before the reign of Diocletian, and the name Gogmagog is a mangled borrowing from the Old Testament.

But if that origin story doesn't suit you there are plenty of others to choose from, one involving Noah and King Albion that included a punch-up with Hercules. Why did anyone believe that Britain was founded by giants? In the fifteenth century some huge bones were unearthed and assumed to be from giants' skeletons. I suspect they were dinosaur bones.

These histories were accepted as fact for centuries. They had real importance to the medieval participants of early processions. It might simply have been that the Latins who invaded felt threatened by the British, who, like most northern races, were significantly taller than their southern counterparts.

We do know that Gog and Magog are most likely to be of Arabic origin, because they're only fleetingly in the Book of Revelation but they appear twice in the Qu'ran as Yajuj and Majuj.

If all this seems like ancient history to those in the New World, it's worth bearing in mind that merchants were busily writing out detailed receipts for goods five thousand years ago in the cradle of

civilization, Iraq. It seems the Gog and Magog myths may have had an earlier life, so London might be Arabic in origin.

Which nicely complicates things.

I do hope I'm not putting you off just yet. Hang about, there's something wrong with this infernal machine. John, help me, would you?

JOHN MAY: Arthur, let me – there are yards of tape coming out, didn't you notice? Why don't you just record on your phone?

ARTHUR BRYANT: Ha ha. As if that was possible. There, I can wind it all in with a pencil.

Right, we're back. I'd just like to say—

JOHN MAY: You don't have to shout into it, you're not doing the shipping forecast.

Actually, can I say something? A bit I prepared earlier. Shall I read it?

For a city forged in fire, it's remarkable that London is two-thirds in shadow even on the brightest days. In summer there are just four hours of clammy darkness each night; in winter almost nothing but clouded gloom. Warm cities spend most of their lives asleep, but in the long winter London awakes. Its demeanour is corpse-grey and forbidding but it has the kind of temperate warmth that leaves you sweating in a raincoat. It's a city that thrives on money. Within is an ancient engorged heart that endures like a vampire feeding off willing victims.

ARTHUR BRYANT: A bit intense, John. Did you write that as a teenager, by any chance?

JOHN MAY: I did, as it happens. My first impression of London.

ARTHUR BRYANT: I do the impressions, if you don't mind. You might want to ease up on the metaphors, there's a chap.

JOHN MAY: I think you should carry on.

ARTHUR BRYANT: I was just about to. I'm old; everything takes longer. You've seen me on staircases.

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This isn't a chronological history and I'm not going to drag you through every London neighbourhood barking facts about monuments that aren't there any more. I want you to glimpse other Londons. The good thing about this method is that you don't have to tip me and I don't have to keep you supplied with sausage rolls from Edwardian Fred's dodgy stall just because I still owe him money for a greyhound.

When you visit a new city, everything about it is exciting, with the possible exception of McDonald's. The lamp-posts, the food, the letter boxes: all inspire the curious. When we talk about London we often discuss it in the past tense, even though the city has a healthy disrespect for history and prefers to keep forging forward. I plan to redress the balance and wherever possible go backwards. We can talk about what's left. Much of the city is hidden from outsiders, but sometimes a door is left ajar.

You probably need a breather after all this. It gets racier as we go on, trust me. Time for a quick cuppa and a pee. Janice bought me a Tower Bridge teapot. It didn't quite find its place at home so it's downstairs in the Common Room, where we'll reconvene.

2

GOING UP THE STRAND & OTHER STORIES

ARTHUR BRYANT: Like the streets themselves, London's history is contradictory and designed to trip you up. As I take you back and forth across the city, certain subjects, areas and characters will overlap. This is because many places have more than one facet to reveal, and because I tend to forget where I've been. I do know I prefer walks that aren't far from a toilet.

Unlike its rigidly planned European counterparts, London was never a regimented city. Most of its grand schemes were compromised. It was more like a disorderly natural garden, with the hardiest parts crowding out the weak and exotic new species arriving daily. It was constructed by landlords like the Duke of Bedford and builders like Thomas Cubitt, through private enterprise and public interference.

London is a city of immigrants. Hardly surprising, as the distance between England and France, using the traditional preferred measurement of London buses, is only around 2,772 bus-lengths, just over twenty miles. Immigrants built our first roads, founded Marks & Spencer, invented the Mini, the Ritz and the London Underground. Without a steady influx of global innovators the city would have died of stagnation centuries ago, and the process continues unchanged today.

I'm interested in the connections that reveal London's personality. Imagine you're on one of my walking tours. I had to give them up

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after an unfortunate incident. All I can say is, if you suddenly need to break wind don't slip into the royal box of the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane without first checking there's no one else in it.

Let's start this chapter in a small cul-de-sac called Rose Street, outside the Lamb & Flag public house in Covent Garden (you'd better get used to the pubs, as we'll be coming across quite a few). Back when the water of London was polluted, beer had once been recommended as a nutritional drink for children. Anyone could brew and sell it if they paid two guineas for the licence fee. By 1638 the Lamb & Flag was already an established public house, although like most London pubs of any longevity it had several other names.

Its sign is an ancient reminder of the Knights Templar, the lamb representing Christ and the flag St George. The pub is wedged into a corner of Rose Street and hemmed by Lazenby Court, connected via a narrow low-ceilinged passageway that has left many a homebound drunk with a bruised forehead. Not me, of course. I wear a hat.

In 1679 England's first Poet Laureate, John Dryden, was beaten up by three chaps in the passageway for writing an insulting satire about one of Charles II's mistresses. The assault became celebrated as the 'Rose Alley Ambuscade'. There's still an air of ambush about the place; once inside the alleyway, there is no easy way to pass someone.

The pub itself is narrow and dark, a perfect spot to set off from, like Burlington Bertie from Bow, heading along the Strand:

I'm Burlington Bertie, I rise at ten-thirty,
And saunter along like a toff.
I walk down the Strand with my gloves on my hand,
Then I walk down again with them off.

Except that this famous London music hall song is itself a parody of another earlier song, somewhat darker in tone:

Who is it that turns up, the lonely girl's friend?
Who is it that nightly his club must attend?
Who is it drinks brandy and smokes strong cheroots?
Who is it that gets into bed with his boots?
Burlington Bertie from Bow!

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At the end of the original song Burlington Bertie makes up for his shady ways by offering to die for his country; not quite so jolly. You may as well get used to this; you're going to find that a lot of things are not quite how you thought they were. For now, though, let's saunter down the Strand.

As we'll see on numerous occasions, nothing in London is ever where it's supposed to be. Just as Islington's Upper Street is in fact its lower street, the Strand, one of London's grandest thoroughfares, is not a strand at all. A strand is the edge of a river, but the river in question here is the Thames. It follows a path only in the sense that you can eventually follow one end of a hurled rope to the other. The river meanders, but the Strand, its edge, does not.

This is because the Strand is not a bridle path but one of the straightest, widest roads in the capital. It was smartly paved and presented as the royal pathway to London, connecting the City's Square Mile to Westminster Abbey via the little village of Charing. It now finds itself lying inland, left high and dry because of the Victoria Embankment, which was created in 1870 by the Water Board, as the Strand was congested and London needed somewhere to site its sewage system.

Further along it is one of my favourite notorious London pubs, the Coal Hole, which turns up in my memoirs owing to its strong connection with Gilbert & Sullivan, who virtually lived their entire lives on the Strand. Although Sullivan ended up gambling his nights away in Nice, so that's not quite true. Dead at fifty-eight. Dreadful.

Gilbert & Sullivan were opposites in almost every way. William Schwenck Gilbert (words) was born just off the Strand and as a baby was kidnapped in Naples, an event which clearly influenced some of his plots. He was nervous, prickly, insular and rather posh. Arthur Sullivan (music) was lower in class, charming, expansive and likeable. Despite constant ill health his calm demeanour put everyone at their ease. On their opening nights at the Savoy, Gilbert would drive himself into so great a state of nervous tension that he couldn't bear to remain in the theatre. So he'd slip out and retire to the Coal Hole for a livener.

Gilbert & Sullivan are almost forgotten in their own city. Opera lovers snobbishly dismiss them as irrelevant, yet the opposite is true.

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Gilbert's satirical edge was enough to keep him from honours lists and Sullivan set new standards for sacred music. Theatres would have their house lights half up so that patrons could follow their librettos, but now surtitles have transformed the works and wiped away decades of horrible amateur productions by revealing how dry, witty and subtle G&S can be. They are part of the musical spirit of London.

The Coal Hole pub occupies what was once the coal cellar for the Savoy Hotel. It stands on the site of the Fountain Tavern, where the coal-heavers drank. Like many Strand venues it was a 'song and supper' club, where regulars were encouraged to sing sentimental ballads and comic songs with smutty punchlines. Gilbert & Sullivan regularly performed here after rehearsals. Well into the late twentieth century there were still pub acts parodying G&S operas.

The Shakespearean actor Edmund Kean started the Wolves' Club in the pub's basement for 'oppressed husbands forbidden to sing in the bath'. However, its real purpose involved heavy drinking and ladies of the night, most of whom worked just across the road. The cellar bar still bears the actor's name.

The theme of pale stone, dark wood and leaded windows carries into the street level bar. The ceiling is high. Black beams and hanging banners suggest something medieval, but the pub was decorated this way in 1904, a time of looking back. Beneath the beams is a marble frieze of maidens picking grapes. There's a huge fireplace decorated with a relief of vines. The gallery bar is a good vantage point, and there are dining rooms.

The pub's art nouveau décor was created in a brief interlude between the brashness of the late Victorian gin palaces and a new sentimental movement that favoured the fake Ye Olde Inne look. It's best on a rainy night, and if you venture to the rear of the pub and follow it around to the left you'll find a snug bar that can't have changed much in a century.

The Strand started the whole street-numbering thing because the official residence of the Secretary of State was here during Charles II's time and became known as '1 Strand'. There's one building with an even nicer address and that's Number One, London – Apsley House, built by Robert Adam in the 1770s, so called because it stood next to the turnpike into London. It was one of several aristocratic

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English townhouses on Piccadilly, but the others were demolished to widen Park Lane. It's probably the best preserved example because the 9th Duke of Wellington still lives in part of the building. It's a grand house but I've been all around the neighbourhood and couldn't find a decent tobacconist's anywhere.

I've always liked the narrow stepped ginnels that lead from the south side of the Strand down to the river. They hold hidden pubs like the Ship & Shovell, the only London pub in two halves, one bar on either side of the alley.

Its namesake, Sir Cloudesley Shovell, was Admiral of the Fleet, battling pirates and enemies of King Charles II until his ill-fated fleet was smashed on the rocks of the Scilly Isles in 1707.

Having lost his life and four of his ships in one of the greatest marine disasters in British history, Shovell was naturally commemorated on a pub sign. The disaster had spawned its own mythology; it was said that a sailor who had tried to warn the Admiral that his fleet was off course had been hanged from the yardarm for inciting mutiny, and that as a result of this injustice no grass could ever grow on the Admiral's grave.

There were other bizarre tales: that Shovell was still alive when he reached the shore of Scilly at Porthellick Cove but was murdered by a woman for the sake of his priceless emerald ring, and that the woman who stole it confessed on her deathbed thirty years later.

After two and a half centuries the remains of the lost fleet were discovered by a Royal Navy minesweeper. Its treasures were recovered and sold at Sotheby's. The pub survives as a monument to maritime failures. There's an elegant marble memorial to Shovell sculpted by Grinling Gibbons in Westminster Abbey. That's what you get for being a rubbish admiral.

The Strand has a famous church in the middle of the road: St Clement Danes, the Air Force church, surrounded by magnolia trees and traffic heading to Fleet Street. Greeting you are two statues of wartime RAF leaders, Hugh Dowding and Arthur 'Bomber' Harris.

In fact there are *two* churches right next to each other, but nobody notices the small, baroque St Mary le Strand; it's lost behind its grander sister. Charles Dickens's parents were married beneath its tiered steeple.

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The Danish have long been associated with the Strand, and St Clement Danes was the centre of their settlement. The Vikings were supposedly an aggressive lot (although we don't really have a lot of information on their life in London) and had a bash at pulling down London Bridge.

Theatres were always a key part of the Strand's appeal. The Gaiety, on the Aldwych at the eastern end of the Strand, seated over two thousand patrons and sold perfumed programmes. Many theatres were built above springs, wells and waterways, partly because their impresarios wanted to incorporate water spectacles in their productions. The steam engine powering scene changes at the Palace Theatre ran (and I believe can still run) from an underground well.

On the side of the Lyceum Theatre just off the Strand three names could be seen: Terry, Stoker and Irving. Bram Stoker was the acting manager of the Lyceum. On 18 May 1897, a week before Stoker's most famous novel was published, *Dracula, or The Un-Dead* was performed at the theatre in order to secure its stage copyright. Only two members of the public paid a guinea to see it. The actor-manager Henry Irving turned down his chance to play Dracula, but then he also turned down the part of Sherlock Holmes. Bram Stoker died penniless and never saw the riches that accrued from his legacy. As for Ellen Terry, the beautiful leading lady of the late nineteenth century, she won accolades for her Shakespearian roles and moved from stage to screen. Her career spanned nearly seven decades.

The old Trafalgar Square tube station at the far end of the Strand had unique colours (brown, cream and green) so that passengers could identify it without having to read the name.

There were two other tube stations here: Embankment and Charing Cross. Strand and Trafalgar Square were too near each other to be needed. Embankment was actually Charing Cross but the Northern Line opened another Charing Cross nearer the station. You can't have two identically named stations in the same place so one became Charing Cross (Strand), then the Bakerloo opened their own Charing Cross (Strand) and the two older names sort of swapped, but there was another station called Strand at the other end of the Strand, so this became Aldwych while one Strand closed and the other became Charing Cross Embankment, and Trafalgar Square

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closed down and Charing Cross moved to Strand. Got it? Don't look at your friend and shake your head.

I sympathize. Like everything else in London, it's as clear as mud. God knows how visitors cope, especially after I've given them directions. If you want to know where everything is, by all means talk to a cabbie or a copper, but they'll give you different answers.

By the way, the name Charing Cross comes from Edward I's adoration of his wife, Eleanor of Castile, a successful businesswoman in her own right and an influential patron of literature; he called his dear queen – *chère reine*. The ornate Gothic spire inconveniently stuck in the former car park outside Charing Cross Station is a Victorian replica of one of twelve monuments erected in the thirteenth century to her memory, which marked the resting places of her funeral procession. The others were at Lincoln, Grantham, Stamford, Geddington, Northampton, Stony Stratford, Woburn, Dunstable, St Albans, Waltham and Cheapside. I'm not doing this from memory, I had Janice print them out for me.

At the other end of the Strand there's a deep and ancient holy well, underneath Australia House. It was used by the Saxons who inhabited Aldwych because they were too scared to live in the haunted Roman ruins of the City. Maybe they had a phobia about short Italians. Everyone threw their rubbish down the well and then drank out of it. Typical. But it's still there under a wooden lid, and its water is probably more potable now than it was then.

The Strand became popular with dukes and earls. The governors of the Empire headed here to purchase their fly whisks and solar topees. Dickens enjoyed the 'Roman' bath on Strand Lane, the *Strand* magazine introduced the world to Sherlock Holmes, and Strand cigarettes told smokers, 'You're never alone with a Strand'.

The Wig and Pen Club at number 230, opposite the Royal Courts of Justice, gained its name because gossip was sold to journalists from those inside the court. It's the only Strand building to survive the Great Fire of London and has now closed down, trapping the headless ghost of Oliver Cromwell inside it. The gaiety theatres and music halls, the brothels, taverns and supper clubs had nearly all vanished by the twenty-first century, unable to compete with office rents.

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One end of the Strand is guarded by a legendary creature: the silver Temple Bar ‘gryphon’. It marks the line where royalty is separated from commerce. Theoretically the Queen isn’t allowed to go east of it without receiving a formal invitation from the Lord Mayor.

The Strand was ahead of its time. It had the first gas lamps, the first public electric lighting and the first plate-glass windows along its length. During the Second World War the plate glass was blown out and replaced with telephone directories – a decent substitute for sandbags.

But the street was also a steadfast barrier between rich and poor. While the royal family owned the land from the south side to the river, the half not under their jurisdiction was threaded with dark alleyways where mountebanks, stage-door Romeos and good-time girls loitered to smoke and flirt. A few of them are still there (the alleyways, not the good-time girls).

The Strand is full of surprises. The playwright Ben Jonson used to drink in the Palsgrave Tavern, which was turned into London’s most elegant bank, Lloyds, which was covered in mosaics of beehives, fish and owls. The story goes that the dining room of Lloyds was air-conditioned by two ladies in the basement riding a tandem to power a pair of bellows. It sounds ridiculous, but when the building was renovated workmen found the bicycle and its attached airpipe.

So a bank was once a pub, and a tea shop was once a coffee house.

The Starbucks on Russell Street was a coffee house three hundred years earlier, in 1712. Back then it was called Button’s, and it wasn’t the first. A Greek chap had started selling Turkish coffees in London in 1652. By the beginning of the next century there were over three thousand coffee houses here. They allowed for free public discourse, bringing together ideas and discoveries. Isaac Newton once dissected a dolphin on a table in the Grecian Coffee House. The venue was frequented by members of the Royal Society and gradually became a centre of learning.

Although coffee encouraged sociability, tea remained king. Apparently 68 per cent of Britons turn to tea in a dilemma, making it Britain’s most common response to trouble. On Christmas mornings my old man used to put whisky in everyone’s tea as part of a family tradition he had just made up. No wonder our aspidistra died.

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The Twinings Tea Museum should therefore be a place of pilgrimage. It's actually a tiny shop built on the site of Tom's Coffee House in the Strand, and has been around since 1706. The tea is excellent and they have a delightful range of teapots. It's the world's oldest tea shop, a narrow canister-lined hall with a miniature 'tea museum' (actually a few cupboards) at the end. The exhibits include a wooden box with the gold-painted initials 'T.I.P' meaning 'To Improve Promptness'. If you wanted your beverage a bit faster you'd drop a few pence in, hence the word 'tip'.

All this recording is parching my throat. I shall be stopping at a nearby hostelry for oesophageal easement, so this part of the tour is now over. Oh, sorry, your 'virtual' tour. John, if anybody wants me I may be found in the Scottish Stores.

JOHN MAY: Your recorder is still taping.

ARTHUR BRYANT: I think it's gummed up with something. I shouldn't have gone near it with glue on my hands. Could you have a look? You're the technical one.

JOHN MAY: Only if you buy me a pint.

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3

A BENT STICK & OTHER STORIES

ARTHUR BRYANT: I spy something beginning with beer.

Before we get too deep into my personal take on this great metropolis of nine million people, my partner John feels that as my old nickname was 'Hollow Legs' Bryant I am the most qualified to explain why public houses occupy such an important place in London's cultural life.

Boozers became territories into which you could be invited by a landlord or landlady who had the right to favour you or bar you. They tended not to kick out the interesting ones even when they were quite mad, so pubs became places for top banter, where opposites could meet and confront each other without prejudice, on neutral territory.

That's why the landlord is referred to as the host, and why rooms in pubs were used to hold local inquests, so that the deceased could be sure of a fair and impartial verdict upon his death.

Walking into a pub alone was for many young people a rite of passage and their first act of independence. The connection between pubs and conviviality gives us a more louche attitude to drinking than, say, in America, where you have to be twenty-one years of age. Quafftide* is a cornerstone of being English.

* Time for drinking.

Pubs had a profound effect on English society, acting as combined intellectual salons, psychotherapy units and hotbeds of conspiratorial rebellion. We get newspapers from coffee houses and pubs, where gossip was first written down and circulated, and they're still often owned by celebrities as a badge of pride.

Pubs are wilfully eccentric and have a complex set of social codes. Some celebrate their history with rituals or commemorative events where the patrons dress up. You never tip, but you can buy the host a pint when you order another round by saying 'Have one for yourself', and if you feel your beer glass is not full enough, you may ask for a top-up without incurring rancour. All PCU staff have to learn the rules of a complicated coin game solely designed to trick Raymond Land into buying huge rounds. He'll be along a bit later. We can try it out on him then.

London still hosts theatre pubs, traditional pubs, readers', writers' and artists' pubs, sports pubs and a thousand places where odd societies or different professions meet. Pubs infiltrate our language; drinkers used to share the same mug, in which the level of ale was marked with a wooden peg, hence the expression 'to take you down a peg or two'. The masons who built our churches were housed at inns, hence the Masonic connections of certain pubs, and even the Knights Templar had their own drinking holes.

Pub names provided markers for all kinds of historical events and characters – Red Lion, White Hart, George & Vulture, Crown & Anchor, Royal Oak, Coach & Horses; each has its own convoluted meaning. Publicans who named their boozers after specific monarchs grew tired of repainting their signs and adopted less time-sensitive royal titles, like the more generic Rose & Crown.

We meet our loved ones in pubs and even find our way around the city by their locations. In the late Victorian era there was one pub for every one hundred people in the country. Cultural barriers were broken down on almost every street corner. To find the real London, you need to go into the backstreets and find a corner pub.

The staff of the Peculiar Crimes Unit drink at the Scottish Stores (1901) on the Caledonian Road. When the hardboard walls of the dodgy old strip club on this site were removed a few years ago, the original Arts and Crafts décor of the earlier pub was found to

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have been perfectly preserved behind the panels, and the pub was restored.

We also favour the King Charles I, which has a mix of old hippies, art students and deranged barflies. It once hosted the Nude Alpine Climbing Challenge and is always either packed or closed, according to some mysterious timetable the landlord keeps in his head. There are stags' heads dotted around and a stained-glass window of someone who may or may not be one of the Everly Brothers. There was a stuffed moose above the bar billiards table but he fell to bits. The bar is tiny, yet they find room to have bands playing. The last time I went there the drinkers played themes from *Star Wars* on massed ukuleles led by Uke Skywalker. The science fiction writer Iain Banks wandered in one evening and we got into an argument about quantum physics.

In 1867 the Trades Directory listed the top London trade as being a publican. Perusing the directory, I found a lengthy list of the mid-Victorian period's most popular pub names. In number-one place was the King's Arms (eighty-seven) and the King's Head (sixty) with the Queen's Arms and the Queen's Head following closely behind, it clearly being fashionable to spatchcock the royals into body parts.

At the last count there were twenty-six Royal Oaks, seventy-three Crowns, plus many variants thereof – Crown & Anchors, Crown & Cushions, Crown & Sceptres, Crown & Apple Trees, Crown & Anvils and Crown & Barley Mows. Then we shift down the royalty tree to include Princes Albert and Alfred and Princesses Beatrice and Alice before moving on to dukes and duchesses, oddly no barons but an assortment of lords and ladies. I do this research so that you don't have to.

There are a lot of blue things: Blue Pumps, Anchors, Lasts, Posts and one Blue-Eyed Maid in Borough High Street. Twenty-four Red Lions herald a bestiary of Dragons, Horses, Monkeys, White Harts (deer), Swans, Goats, Spread Eagles and Red Herrings. Three seems to be a lucky number: Three Tuns, Three Turks, Three Compasses, Three Spies, Three Castles, Three Horseshoes, etc. There are a lot of professions, too: Jolly Butchers, Carpenters, Skinners, Hatters, and of course a plethora of naval heroes and naval terms, like the Ship & Billet and the We Anchor In Hope. The Crooked Billet is a name that

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traditionally refers to a bent stick that has fallen from a tree. It dates from a time when an old boot or a stick would be hung from a tree to indicate the presence of an alehouse.

There's a steady turnover of pubs with pastiche names like the Ape & Bird, the Camel and Artichoke, the Pregnant Man, the Frog and Radiator, the Pyrotechnists Arms, John the Unicorn, the Blacksmith & the Toffemaker, and the Racketeer, the last named after Dickensian hooligans who would make a racket on saucepans to distract a fine lady or gentleman while they were having their pockets picked.

I have a fondness for blunt names like the Dog, which was in Archway ('I'm going up the Dog for an hour'), and the Boot, one of several boozers frequented by Charles Dickens, still very much alive in Bloomsbury. Nearly every pub in London got rid of its separate bars. Only a tiny handful have retained the old screens that divided Public and Saloon. These separated the ruffians from the bank clerks, but were topped with rotating smoked-glass panels so that you could chat through them, should you wish to converse with someone from the lower orders. I'm not a fan of the class system, so in my book the removal of screens was a bloody good idea.

Now for something that's gone. You'll find I do this a lot. My only excuse is that I've lived too long and remember a great many things that aren't there any more or were possibly never there in the first place.

A walking tour with nothing to see is depressing – 'Beneath this car park was the spot where Anna May Wong performed her celebrated fan dance' and so on – but this is a book so you don't have to worry about not seeing something that isn't there. Things move about a lot in London. Right now I'm thinking about a bookshop that won't stay still.

Samuel French was a Massachusetts entrepreneur who co-founded a theatrical publishing and licensing business in 1859. He soon became the most important theatrical publisher in England. At the time of his death in 1898 almost all renowned English playwrights of the present and recent past had been represented by his Covent Garden company.

In the 1960s new theatre writing flourished, but rising labour costs

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forced up seat prices, which meant that theatres needed houses to stage sure-fire hits that would pay for new plays. If plays fail to enter repertoires they vanish. The shock of their experience fades, and only the scripts are left behind like phantoms. French published these phantom scripts and sold them to theatre companies. His shop was a treasure house of theatre where penniless writers and actors sat on the floor reading all day. In 2018 it found its latest home in Chelsea's Royal Court Theatre.

When you're a beat officer you see London from the pavement up. Shops are gutted and replaced at phenomenal speed. Go away for the weekend and you'll return to find that your favourite bookshop has become a Japanese bubble tea bar. I'm told they're a 'thing' now, whatever that means.

And you get to know the people who stick around. Tiny Elena Salvoni worked in the London restaurant business for more than seven decades. After the war she ran a restaurant called Bianchi's on Soho's Frith Street, and stayed there for the next thirty years. Although it was popular with Sean Connery, Maria Callas and the like, she encouraged broke actors and artists to hang out there too, knowing they would bring a certain *louche*, argumentative charm to the place. They would sit with their French's play scripts and bicker, and whenever it looked as though they couldn't afford to stay any longer she would stroll past the table and surreptitiously stick a bottle of cheap plonk on it so that they wouldn't leave. I blame my drinking habits on that woman, but thanks to people like her Covent Garden and Soho kept a reputation for literary and artistic gatherings. Anyone in a silly hat can be a 'character', but Soho didn't just have characters – it had talent.

French's, Bianchi's, various basement cafés, dive bars like the Bag O' Nails, corrupted from the 'Bacchanales' (French religious festivals), did more for struggling artists than most courses in creativity. Every city needs its thinkers and dreamers, or, as Meera calls them, 'layabouts'.

While we're on the subject of London theatricals, you may wish to consider visiting Pollock's, the combined theatre shop and toy museum in Whitfield Street, just behind Charlotte Street. It was also started in Covent Garden a couple of hundred years ago by a

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gentleman named John Kilby Green, and continued to delight children for generations. During the Second World War a V2 rocket destroyed the building but the stock, including the beautiful printing plates used in making the toy theatres, had been moved to safety beforehand.

Painted red and green, the museum retains a strange charm in its narrow winding corridors and still sells its miniature cut-out toy theatres. If children could be encouraged to build these instead of staring at their walkie-screens the world would be a nicer place. Don't get me started before I've had one of my pills.

I need to mention the East End district of Whitechapel because it's where I was born, and thought that perhaps we could discuss it without mentioning J*ck the R*pper. But I think we'll have to brush up against his coat-tails.

For me, Whitechapel seems to exist in multiple dimensions.

Once it was the home of wealthy merchants and members of the all-devouring East India Company. It has housed French, Jewish and Bangladeshi immigrant communities, welcoming all into its teeming, pungent backstreets, and all have left their imprint. But before then, I'd like to have shown you Dorset Street (prime R*pper territory, as it housed Mary Kelly, his final victim). This was the infamous 'worst street in London', named by George Duckworth, the investigator working for one of London's great social reformers and benefactors, Charles Booth. Dorset Street is now buried beneath blocks of squeaky clean offices.

Booth recognized the limits of philanthropy and did something about it. He pushed for the first old-age pensions and in 1889 created maps of the London poor, tabulating and grading streets, trying to understand how their residents survived.

His poverty maps show how a handful of bad families categorized as the 'vicious poor' could destroy the reputation of a whole neighbourhood. Consequently, benefactors descended upon the East End to do good works. Not all were sympathetic; the Reverend Lord Sydney Godolphin Osborne sneered in *The Times* that East Enders were 'a species of human sewage'. As far as I can tell all he ever did was write indignant letters to *The Times*.

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For me Whitechapel was simply home. I was raised in a Victorian terraced house without a bathroom, a television, a fridge or a lavatory. Tell this to kids now and they look horrified. Tell them that the lavatory was outside, the food was kept cool in a tin-fronted pantry and you had to fill a tin bath in the kitchen to wash, and they'll think you're three hundred years old. Chilling food in refrigerators was a habit we adopted from America. Our produce was purchased fresh and in such a cool climate it didn't need storing just above zero.

For nearly two centuries Whitechapel became the sanctuary of paupers and those who preyed upon them, until estate agents suddenly noticed it was within walking distance of the City of London. Now developers have planted glass towers between the crumbling brick terraces. The new tenants breathe filtered air in cool grey sanctuaries while below them scarlet, azure and emerald sarees are unrolled in Indian stores.

At one edge of Whitechapel was Petticoat Lane, but in a typical London paradox there was never such a street. It's the name of the market that's still there on Sundays. Once called Hog Lane, now Middlesex Street, it remains almost as chaotic and grubby as it ever was. Some said it gained its name because the traders would steal your petticoat at one end of the market and sell it back to you at the other.

For the fashionable, Whitechapel is now filled with converted lofts and basement cocktail bars. But to those who work there it's still a ramshackle market operating from within the battered shells of the twisted old houses that line Commercial Road. Brick Lane was long known as the perfect place for a Ruby Murray* (although every Indian restaurant along it insists they're the winners of the Best Brick Lane Curry award), but now it's in decline. Office workers no longer have huge lunches and prefer to grab a bagel.

It's hardly a tourist highlight but Whitechapel has an oddity; when Wickhams department store was built in 1850 the owner failed to persuade a family of jewellers in the centre of the block to sell up. So

* Belfast singer who had five hits in the Top Twenty in a single week in 1955 and gave us rhyming slang for a curry.

the department store was built around the shop, leaving a bizarre gap in the middle. Eventually the jewellers outlasted the department store. It's always about the long game.

For those sensation-seekers hoping to feel a frisson of Victorian evil, Whitechapel is, for better or worse, still the home of Saucy Jack and will always be associated with the year 1888. There's less of a Gothic atmosphere about the place now, yet a few paces from busy, knocked-about Commercial Street is Whitechapel's Toynbee Hall. It was built by social reformers and on a stormy night could provide the isolated setting for a Hammer horror film. I've been to a few creepy events held there.

Whenever a film shows us Victorian London we see strumpets rolling out of inns and hansom cabs on cobbles, but what was an ordinary street like around that time?

To answer that question, let's hop across to the West End and take a look at the Tottenham Court Road of 1880. This was the artery that joined London's West End to the North. The buildings were of orange brick, grand, ornamented and freshly Gothic, surrounded by horse-drawn omnibuses and genteel squares.

The road is the crossing point of three parishes: St Marylebone, St Pancras and St Giles-in-the-Fields. An area coterminous with the ghosts of buildings lost. The last old wildfowl shop, one of those with gold letters on black glass, where a Christmas goose could be taken down from a rack of fifty fat birds, is long gone. The area has always been disrespectful of fine architecture; an elaborate five-floor building standing alone on Bozier's Court was demolished to 'improve the view'. Traffic grew heavy, carriages rolling in every direction.

The view changed for ever as the ornate buildings fell in 1940, searchlights crossed the sky, shrapnel bounced and sparkled on the pavements and couples made frantic love in darkened doorways, fearing each night would be their last. The war changed everything, as we'll see time and again in these accounts.

The latest incarnation of Tottenham Court Road is sterile but faring better than its neighbour, poor Charing Cross Road. The old Astoria Theatre was a conversion from the Crosse & Blackwell pickle warehouse, and was torn down in 2009. Now there are blinging glass boxes, one finished in rose pink and gold for no reason other than

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