

THE GREAT CITIES / **LONDON**



TIME-LIFE

LONDON

By Aubrey Menen
and the Editors of Time-Life Books

With photographs by Brian Seed

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Cover: a London bus is reflected 25 times in the leaded panes of St. James's, Sir Christopher Wren's church in Piccadilly.

First end paper: in twos and threes an elegant London crowd disperses across the parade ground after the ceremony of Trooping the Colour, the annual Guards parade marking the Queen's official birthday.

Last end paper: seen from inside, the sign on the door of an Edwardian pub's saloon bar is reversed amid graceful arabesques.

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The Heart of the Matter

I know London very well. Part of my life was spent there. But I have also lived in other great cities: Rome, Paris, Naples, Bombay, New Delhi, and I grew familiar with New York. I have returned to London again and again, for long sojourns of six months and more. Each time I returned, I understood it better. The other cities that I knew had sharpened my understanding—by contrast, by comparison, by the way their citizens were so different from the Londoner.

The essence of the Londoner who spends his life there—unlike me—is that he takes London for granted. That is not so with Rome: its inhabitants are always conscious of the history that lies about them. It is not true of Paris: the Parisian thinks that living there makes him a highly special sort of Frenchman. The New Yorker is always asking the visitor what he thinks of New York. The Londoner rarely does that: he assumes the visitor will like the place or he wouldn't be there.

As for the Londoner's own reactions, they are as misty as his city is in autumn. He has no phrases about it; not for him are such descriptions as "The Eternal City", "The City of Light", "Wonderful Town", words that the Romans, the Parisians, and the New Yorkers (in a good mood) will use. For an embarrassing year or two the Londoner found that his city had acquired a dreadful label: "Swinging London". It was with relief that he discovered all that was meant was a part of Chelsea and an obscure street of shops called Carnaby Street. Then it didn't seem to matter so much.

One night I flew in from Rome. It was a clear summer's evening, and London was spread below me, picked out in lights. It was a striking sight and the pilot pointed it out to us. The passengers said: "Look! London!" I said to myself, 'Ah! There's Hyde Park. And that's Hampstead over there. And that must be Camden Town and—yes—there's Whitechapel.' I was looking at my London: the town whose streets I walked as a boy, the place I explored as a young man, the areas that attracted me in my middle age. To me it is not one city. It is an anthology of places, each very different, to my eyes. When I meet a stranger on my travels in the world and he says to me, "I live in Paris", or maybe Vienna or Chicago, it is enough. I know him. But if he says, "I live in London", I always ask, "Whereabouts?" Then he knows *me*. I have spoken like a Londoner.

If you ask a Londoner about London as a whole, he will be vague, very much in the way that a multi-millionaire will be vague if you ask him how much money he has. The trouble is that London is so very big. Transferred to the moon it would be a blotch easily discernible by ordinary binoculars.

Dwarfing the twin cupolas of Victorian government offices in Whitehall, the unmistakable shape of Big Ben rises commandingly like a lighthouse in a spreading tide of new buildings. In this telescopic-lens view, taken from the Duke of York's column in Waterloo Place, the Thames lies out of sight just beyond Big Ben.

Starting from Charing Cross, which is London's geographical centre, a determined tourist wishing to put the whole city under his feet would have 18 miles to walk north, 18 to walk south, the same to walk east and west, and even then he would know little about the place, having missed all the places north-west, north-east, and so on, points of the compass of great significance to the Londoner. If, exhausted, he consults a computer; it will tell him that he has missed approximately 20 square miles of territory, and most of its 7,397,014 inhabitants.

The Londoner is vague, too, about when this gigantic city started, but with more reason, for the historians themselves are just as hazy. It was not there when the Romans conquered Britain in A.D.43. Most Londoners do know of Queen Boadicea. She is a London heroine, because she beat the Romans in battle. What most Londoners do not know is that she also made a general massacre of the inhabitants, Roman or not. There is a monument to her near Parliament, the only monument in the world, so far as I know, erected by a grateful citizenry to someone who cut their throats wholesale.

That massacre took place in A.D. 60. From then on London grew until 18 centuries later, it was acknowledged as the leading city of the civilized world. It was until recent years, the capital of one third of the globe.

That time has passed. It did not last long: a mere hundred years or so, a summer season in the much longer history of Rome. Virtually all that remains of that hegemony is the Imperial State Crown, a jeweller's confection that weighs two and a half pounds and, as King George V remarked, is very difficult to balance on the head. Worn too long, it produces a pain in the neck, and that might have happened to Londoners had their city still been paramount. They have been spared that fate. The Londoner is not stiff-necked. But he is quietly aware that, in the words of St. Paul, he is the citizen of no mean city.

This is the London I shall describe. I shall journey through space and time. If you follow me to the end, I cannot promise you that you will know London. As another essayist has remarked, nobody can be said to do that. But, with the American Oliver Wendell Holmes, I shall hope that you will be able to claim that you know something of it.

On that night when I flew over London, there was one place darker than all the rest. The street lights shone but little else. It was as though some eccentric engineer had thrown a network of roads across a desert. I stared down at it, trying not to listen to the unctuous voice of "your captain" covering up for the plain fact that we were stacked up and waiting for a landing. He did not mention that this dark patch was the very heart of London, without which the vast twinkling sprawl over which we circled would never have been. This was "the City". My mind's eye needed no permission to land, to see it close-to. I saw its empty streets. I saw the caretaker making his way home from the public house, the policeman shaking door-handles and flashing lights through windows. I saw the cats. I heard the

This miniature, perhaps the earliest detailed view of the city, shows old London Bridge (background) and the skyline as it looked in about 1500. It is from a manuscript book of poems by the Duke of Orleans, who was captured by the British and held in the Tower of London beside the river Thames, where he is seen writing (right) and later leaving (left), after his ransom of 300,000 crowns had been paid.



silence. And I saw it as it would be in the morning light: the people walking to work—no, *trotting*—at that peculiar City pace; the traffic shouldering through its narrow lanes. I heard the dull rumble that is the special noise of London. I was a boy again, going to see my father. It is there that I would like us to begin our journey together.

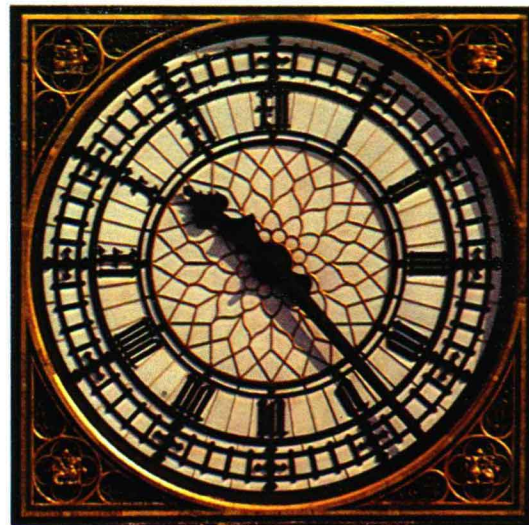
It is a good place in which to start. London is big: the City is small. It is known as the Square Mile. It is not square, but a half-round, bounded by the Thames. It lies within the Roman walls that Boadicea stormed, and once comprised all London. For all that, it is not much concerned with history. Its business is that very contemporary thing—business.

Once, when I was a very small boy at my preparatory school, my companions demanded to know what my father did for a living. I went home and asked my mother. You must say, she told me, that your father is “Something in the City”. This seemed to me unsatisfactory. It was so very vague. I was afraid the other boys would dub me the son of a Beefeater, one of those men in scarlet and gold whose picture was in our history books, and who guarded the Crown Jewels in the Tower of London. Interesting, indeed, but no match for the boy whose father was a professional cricketer and who had (or so he said) actually played at Lord’s, that stretch of turf that is the Elysian Fields for every small English boy. Nevertheless, when the question was asked me again the next day, I said that my father was Something in the City, not trusting my voice very much. It was a success; rather too much of one. My questioner, who was bigger than I, said, “Oh, he is, is he? Then you can lend me a tanner, because I’m broke.” A tanner was a sixpenny piece, and that, in those far-off days, about halved my weekly pocket money. But the son of Something in the City duly paid up. Later, when my father was preparing for one of his trips to the Far East, I peeped into his passport, and there read that he was “a City Merchant”.

I filled out this picture for myself. We had had to learn a poem by John Masefield about a “quinquereme of Nineveh from distant Ophir”. My father’s office in the City, which I had never visited, was filled in my imagination with samples of ivory, an ape or two, and peacocks, and smelled of sandalwood and sweet white wine. It was very romantic and inflating and I lent several more tanners.

Some years passed before I was to see the City in reality. I was summoned to my father’s office. It was a visit that was to be repeated throughout his lifetime, for it was his peculiar ruling that whenever we should speak of affairs between father and son, it should be done in the City, away from the feminine influence of home. His office was on the third floor. But it did smell of sandalwood, for, by a lucky coincidence, the oil of that wood was one of the things my father actually did import from far-off places.

His office smelled of sandalwood, that is, when the windows were shut. When they were open, it smelled of fish. Extending to the right of the street



Although Londoners refer to the familiar clockface (top) as Big Ben, the name properly belongs only to the great bronze hour-bell. The clock’s 13-foot pendulum is adjusted to keep perfect time by adding and removing coins from two piles of pennies (bottom) that are balanced on the pendulum weight.

below was the fish-market of Billingsgate. Porters went to and fro carrying piles of baskets expertly upon their heads. Walking through it, I would stop my nose, but keep my ears open. For centuries, the porters of Billingsgate had been famous for their lurid and original swearing. I would return to school from these visits with a selection of red-hot oaths. I quite eclipsed the boy who had a Bible with all the dirty passages underlined.

Exactly opposite my father's office window rose a tall column on a square base. The column reached well above the building in which my father worked. I asked him what it was about. "That," he said, "is The Monument." "A monument to what, father?" "*The Monument*", he said severely. "It is the only monument in the world which is called, quite simply, *The Monument*. It marks the place where the Great Fire of London started. Well, not quite. If you pushed it over, that gold ball at the top would fall on the shop which started the blaze. The elegant figure you see carved on the base is Charles the Second. What do you know about Charles the Second?"

"Er . . ." I said.

"Think", said my father.

"Er", I said. "Oranges. I mean, Nell Gwyn, who sold oranges and—er—became his mistress.

"I wonder", said my father, "that your headmaster has the nerve to demand the enormous fees I pay for you. Charles the Second, besides having the taste for—ah—oranges as you mention, showed quite remarkable abilities as an organizer when the Fire broke out. In fact, he stopped it by blowing up buildings in its path. He was careful never to show those abilities again. The City of London never liked its monarchs to be too clever. They chased his brother off the throne."

Then he took me to a place where he and other City merchants drank their morning coffee. I was proud to see my father hob-nobbing with the sort of men who had once assessed kings and fired them when they got too big for their breeches. In fact, I had a swollen head. When, in due course, my history master casually mentioned The Monument and said it marked the place where the Great Fire began, I put up my hand, rose, and said, "Not quite, sir," for which he never forgave me.

I went back there yesterday, 40 years on, as we sang at school. I paid my respects to the elegant Charles; I wandered through Billingsgate, reflecting that small boys were now encouraged to swear to relieve their complexes, then took another walk that I know. I went up King William Street, up Threadneedle Street where those City Merchants had for centuries banked their money, and then—should you wish to do the same, take a map, for it is easy to miss—I turned into a narrow alley that led to a small, quiet square with the magnificent name of Great St. Helen's. Great St. Helen's: not Great St. Helen's Square, or Great St. Helen's Close but just Great St. Helen's ("*The Monument*"; I could hear my father's voice in the silence).

At the far end of Great St. Helen's—and it is not so very far—stands





Buckingham Palace, London home of the sovereign since the accession of Queen Victoria in 1837, undergoes a change when the Royal Family is away. On a darkening winter's day, behind locked gates and rainswept tarmac, the familiar long façade presents a considerably altered appearance from the summer sightseer's usual view (inset), as shirt-sleeved crowds gather to watch the Changing of the Guard.



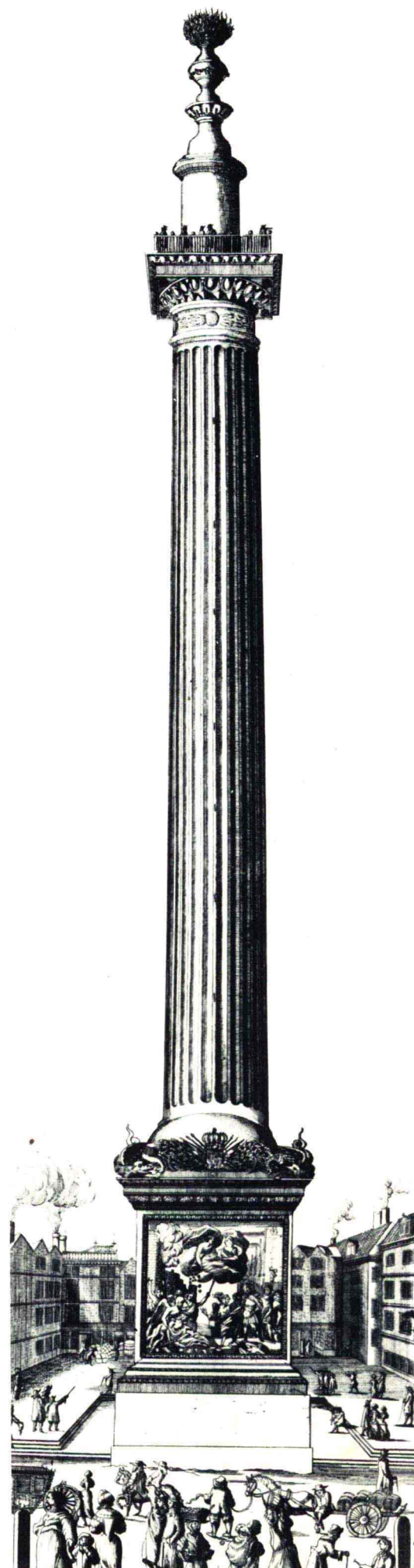
the church after which the square is named. It dates from the 12th Century: a row of battlements along the top give the air of a toy fortress. It must always have looked toy-like, but never more so than today, because behind it now rises a huge office-building of steel and glass—very cold steel and icy glass—that makes the brown stone of the church look warm and inviting. The foreign visitor who sees this unmerciful contrast might be scandalized. He would be wrong: the Londoners who built this church, and paid for it and are buried there, would have been delighted. They might have seen that enormous pile of offices in some happy dream.

Inside the church there are tombs, so many that St. Helen's has been called the Westminster Abbey of the City. Their effigies are there, brightly coloured. They are not all flat on their backs, like the kings and queens in that other Abbey. They kneel in prayer, heads up, man to man with God. With them are their wives and children. They introduce themselves and their families with proud, not to say smug, inscriptions. Here is Sir Andrew Judd. "Knight" is added in case you should miss the "Sir". He dealt in furs, and he went far in search of business. He tells us he travelled to Muscovy, prospered, became Lord Mayor of London. He was a man who, when he made an effort, expected it to pay dividends, even when it was made in bed. He had three wives. One gave him four sons and a daughter, the next "none", the third (a good businessman rebounds from failure) another daughter. These children dutifully produced grandchildren, and "in the month of September a thousand fyve hundred and fyefty eight" this worthy man died "worshipping" (not God, let us note, but) "his posteritye". We can understand him. God was adequately worshipped by the nuns in the convent next door (there is the grille still visible through which they peered at the altar). He, as self-made man, worshipped what he had made.

Near him is Richard Staper. He is balding, he has a large nose, and a stout wife who gazes at him with an expression of great satisfaction. He was, says the stone below him, "the greatest merchant of his time, the chiefest actor in the discovery of the trades of Turkey and East India" (I drop the archaic spelling: business is business, and business depends upon communication. I shall let him get his message across). "He was humble in prosperity" (with that nose?), "painful and ever ready in public affairs, a discreetly liberal housekeeper bountiful to the poor, and an upright dealer in the world, and a devout aspirer after the world to come."

These were the merchant adventurers. Near by is the tomb of a business man who mostly stayed at home. He was Sir Thomas Gresham. He founded the Royal Exchange, and Queen Elizabeth I, well pleased, came to visit it. I have said that I went down Threadneedle Street. It runs by Gresham's Royal Exchange. Hanging over the pavement, high up, is an enormous gilded model of a grasshopper. It was Gresham's crest.

It was men like these who really built London. They made it rich. Monarchs might order palaces; but it was the City that lent them the



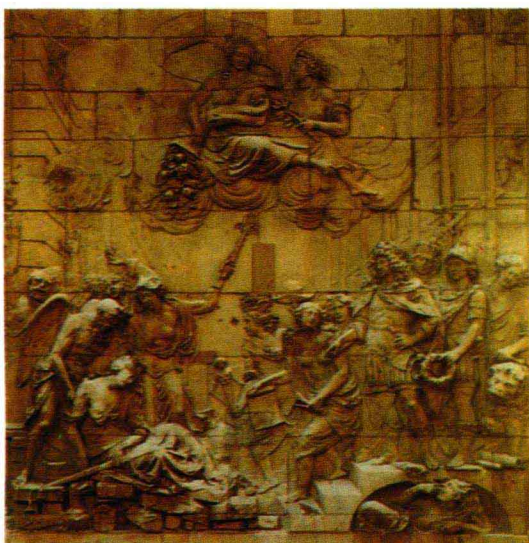
money. Nobles might own broad acres, but it was the City that owned the mortgages, and still does. As William Kirwin, who was buried in St. Helen's in 1594, boasts from his tomb: "The fates have afforded this narrow house to me who have adorned London with noble buildings. By me royal palaces were built for others." It was through such men that London became the capital of the biggest empire that history has known. The Victorians said, "Trade follows the flag"—a nice piece of hypocrisy for, as everyone knew, the flag followed trade, to protect the factories, the trading ports, the bargains and treaties that the City had made. The Indian Empire began in a trading station in Surat, set up on the subcontinent's west coast by men like these who lie in St. Helen's. Some returned rich; some lie buried in Surat. Their tombs are still there, crumbling now, and instead of walking among them in the cool vault of a church, you must pull back the tropical grasses to read their epitaphs.

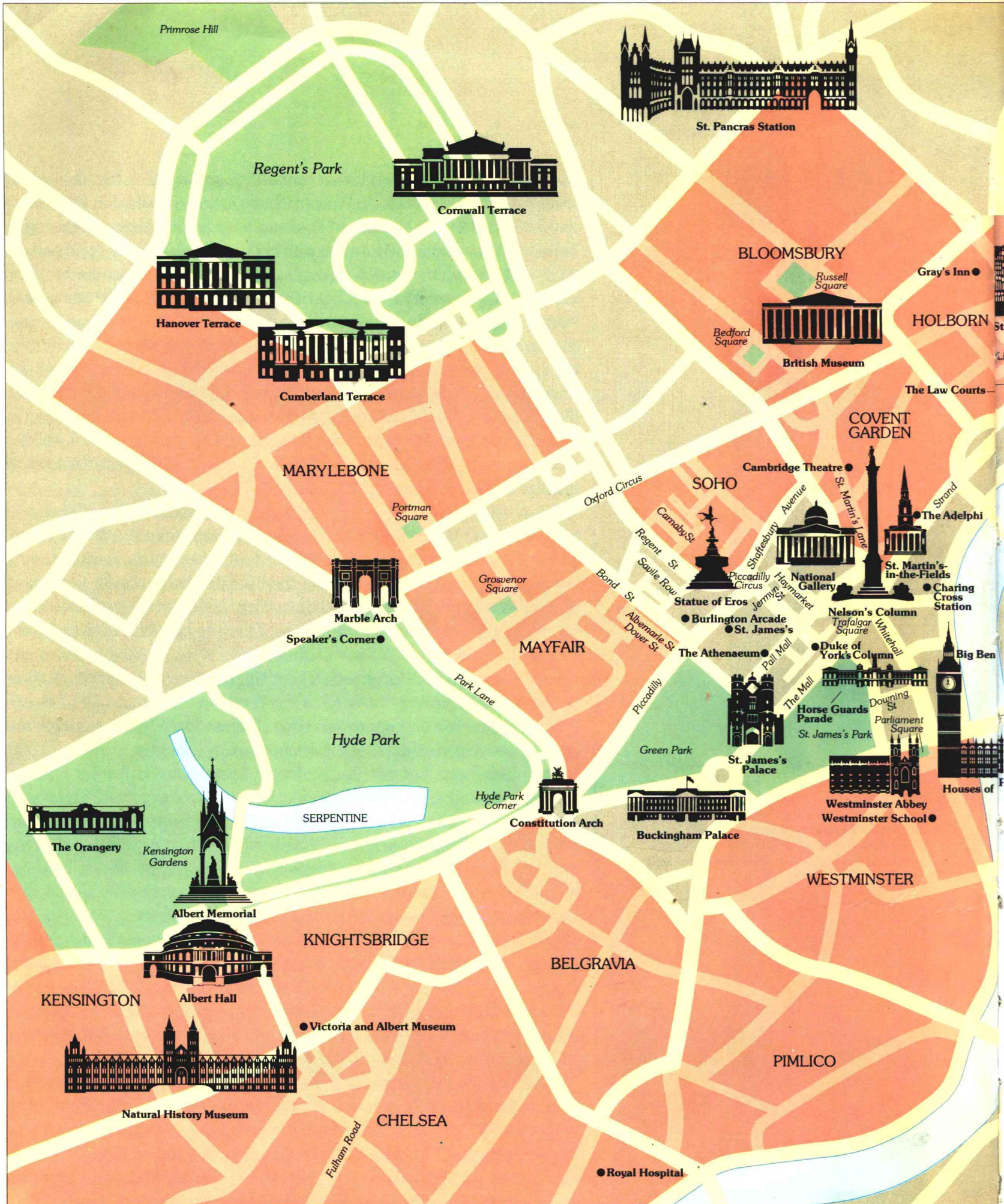
A few steps across Great St. Helen's and you are back in the present, and by that I mean very much in the present. At lunch-time the offices empty and the streets are crowded. I have mixed with the crowds, looking for the bowler hat, the striped trousers and the tightly-furled umbrella so beloved abroad as a symbol of the Englishman. They have gone. I found a top hat or two, but they belonged to doormen. The rare bowler was worn by the very young, jauntily, as if for a joke. The rest were dressed in the many modes current in London, the clerks with long hair reminiscent of courtiers of the elegant Charles.

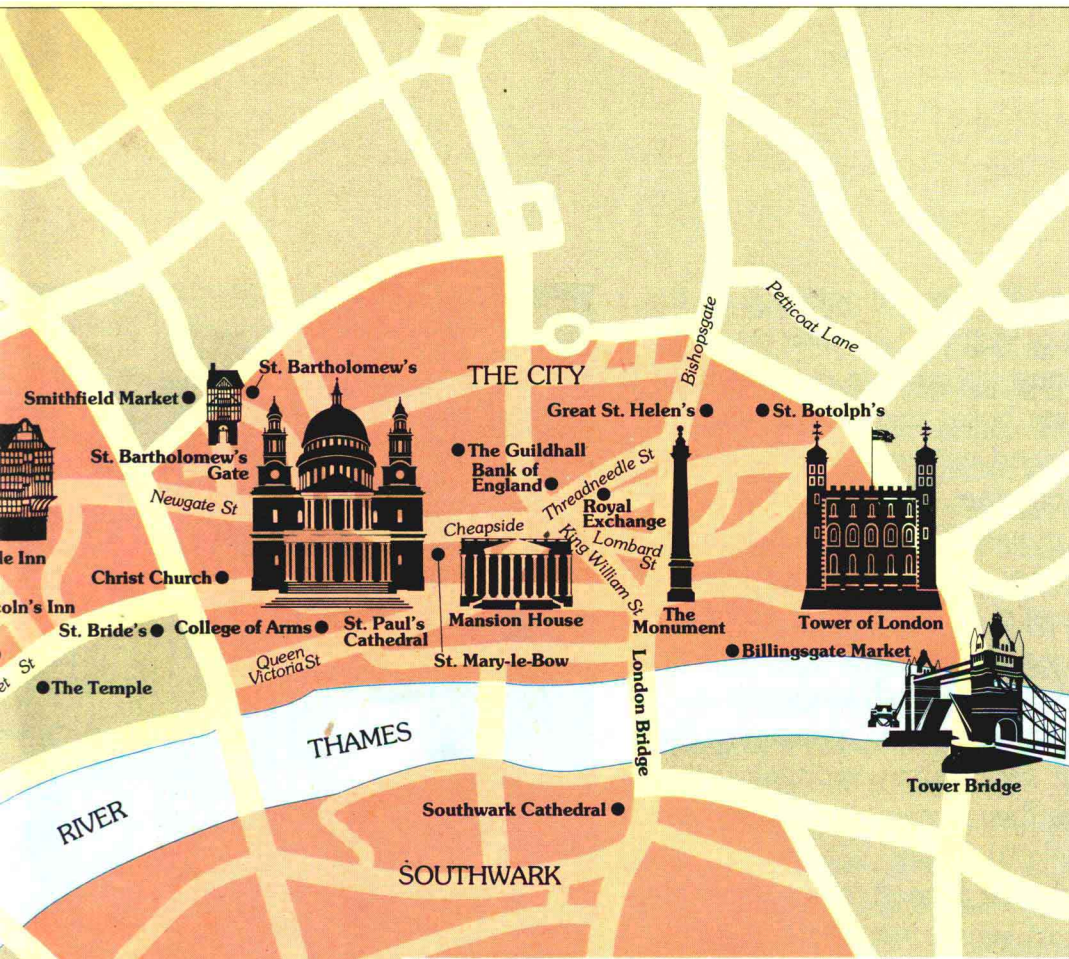
I was interested enough to take one of these long-haired clerks to the brief lunch which is the lot of juniors in the City. Dress may seem a trivial matter elsewhere, but not in London. I knew that the bowler and the umbrella were not, in origin, a City uniform. In the early 1900's a guardsman (a soldier, that is, of the elite regiments in the British Army who guard the monarchy) had to salute a Guards officer when meeting him in the street, even if his superior was dressed as a civilian. The officers hit upon the umbrella as a secret symbol of their rank. The officers hit upon the umbrella as a secret symbol of their rank. The umbrella was rolled to excruciating tightness, and never unfolded, even in pouring rain. The bowler went with it, also a mark of rank, since it was derived from the panoply of fox-hunting. This curious rig was soon copied by the ambitious young with which the City has always swarmed—at which point it was dropped by the officers; nowadays they preserve it only for special occasions. I suppose a salute or two is missed but, in any case, the safety of the Queen is still assured.

Why had the city clerks, in their turn, dropped it? "Simple," said my clerk, as he gobbled. "I dressed that way for my first job. I felt very natty till my boss said, 'Leave the fancy dress to the sheikhs. They have the money; we haven't. If you dressed like that in Paris or Madrid or New York, they would think you were advertising British beer'. So, since I wanted to be sent to Paris and Madrid and New York. I dressed like anybody else."

What Londoners call simply The Monument commemorates the Great Fire of London. It was built in 1672-7 and is shown on the left in a contemporary engraving. In the densely peopled allegory on its base (below), Charles II in Roman dress directs the rebuilding of the city, personified as an exhausted woman (front left).



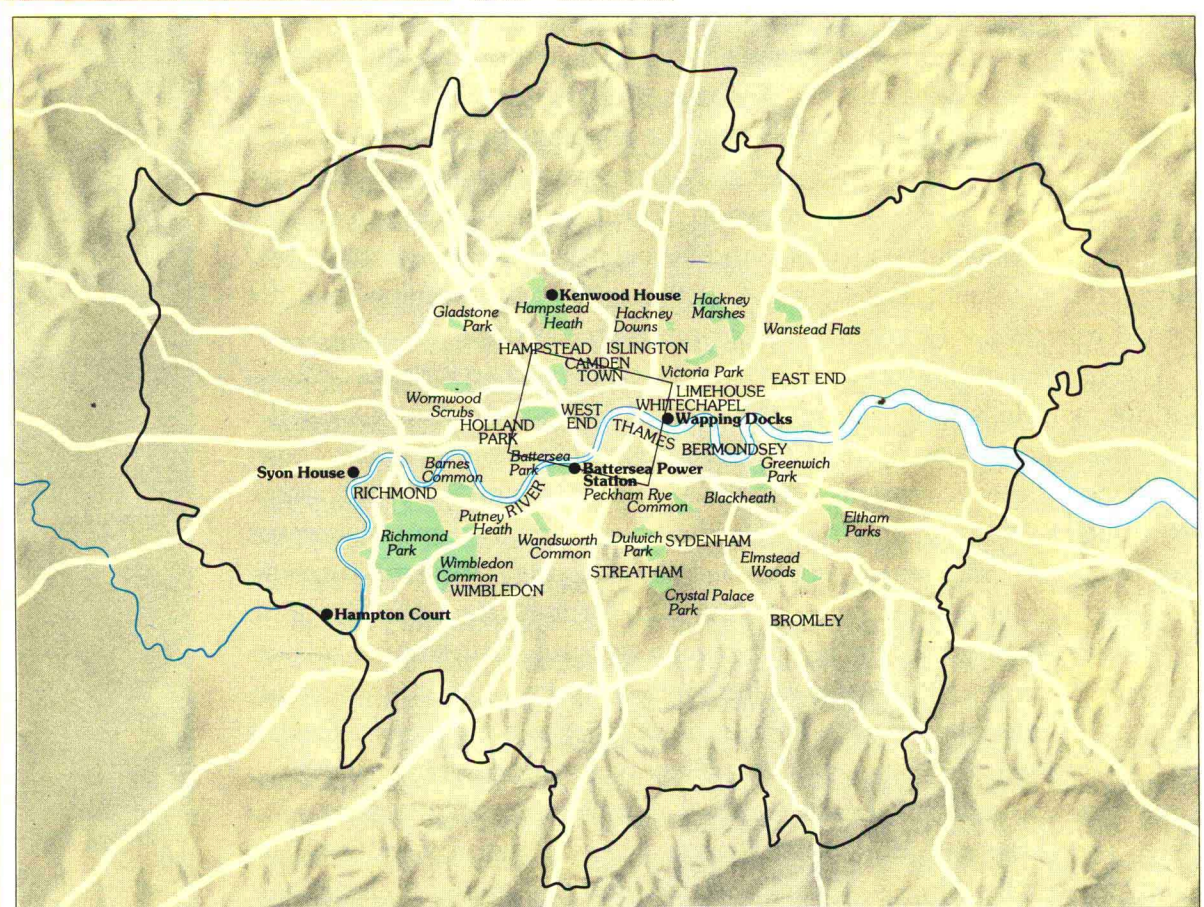




London's Green and Pleasant Town

The heart of London is shown at left, and the 610 square miles of Greater London are rendered in the topographical map below. Buildings, streets and other landmarks mentioned in this book are identified on the maps. In the map at left, approximate boundaries of districts are also given.

The so-called City, the oldest part of London dating back to Roman times and now the business centre, occupies one square mile of territory along the River Thames. It was here that the Great Fire of 1666 began and destroyed nearly five-sixths of the city lying within the old walls. The map below includes all of Greater London's parks—some 40,000 acres of green oasis still preserved in the modern metropolis.



It is true that money no longer flows into the City without effort on the part of the merchants, as it did in the days of Victoria. Like their predecessors who lie in Great St. Helen's, they must go out and get it. But the dealers who sit at telephones in the glass boxes that rise around the churches are made of the same stuff as the adventurers. And the money they bring in, though diminished, is still important. The City, and the rest of London, is built on gravel, mud—and money. The Lord Mayor's state coach is bigger than the monarch's—and what is more, when he rides out in it once a year, he has a great big mace of silver-gilt sticking out of one window. It is as if the Queen of England were to wave the Imperial State Crown at the crowds as she rolled by, to show how much money she had.

But the City has never aimed at being genteel, or even aristocratic. The great merchants have bought themselves vast country properties; they have bought themselves titles, but at heart they remain merchants. Each year they elect one among them to be Lord Mayor, but they do not choose him for his ability alone. They choose a good, companionable fellow, with a solid wife who has a pair of sound feet to stand all the ceremonies and receptions; above all, they choose a man with a deep enough pocket to pay his expenses, which can be enormous. He is elected for one year—perhaps another if he can afford it—during which he hobnobs with the great of the land. He can be anybody, provided he is a city merchant and has the cash. There have been 640 Lord Mayors, and five have even been of foreign extraction. The City is broadminded. Dick Whittington's poverty is a legend, and his cat was invented a century and more after his death. But he was four times Mayor of London, and the legend reflects the fact: humble beginnings are no bar.

The relation of this monarch of the City to the monarch of the realm is curious, and tells much. From the time of William the Conqueror the sovereign had a palace in the City, but safely within the walls of the Tower of London. Later sovereigns preferred Westminster and Whitehall, which were outside the City; and in the Middle Ages, when the Lord Mayor was elected, he dutifully went in procession to the king to pay his loyal respects. The City grew richer and richer: by the 15th Century, the Lord Mayor no longer went to Westminster. His procession stopped at the limits of his own bailiwick. Later the City went even further in proclaiming its independence. When the monarch wished to enter it, he stopped at a gate called Temple Bar. There the Lord Mayor met him. He gave the monarch permission to enter what was after all his own capital, by handing him the City's sword of state. This ceremony is still carried out. It is well worth watching. The Lord Mayor in his robes and chain, and his entourage in medieval costume, outshines the Royal party, which can dress up no further than Service uniforms. It provokes the thought that the office of Lord Mayor is a far more stable one than that of the Crown. And of course it is a fact that no Lord Mayor has had his head cut off.

