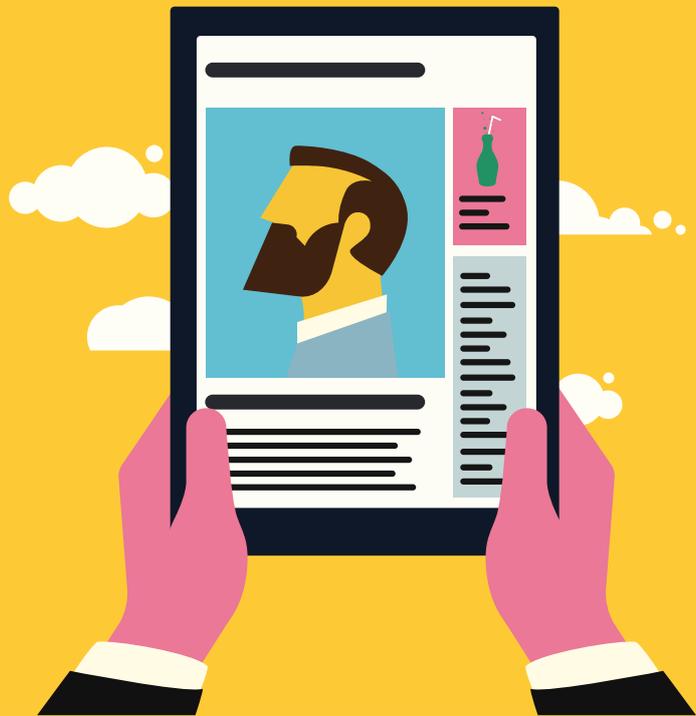


# THE COMMUTER CLUB



## The Mermaid Tavern and the tale of Cheapside's cultural roots.

Later this month, it will be 403 years since the renowned adventurer Sir Walter Raleigh died in Westminster. One of the most notable figures in the Elizabethan era, he played a leading part in the English colonisation of North America, suppressed rebellion in Ireland, and helped defend England during the Spanish Armada. He was a favourite of Queen Elizabeth I, who knighted him in 1585. However, he fell out of favour with her successor, James I, and was charged with treason and executed on 29 October 1618.

Despite his wide-ranging adventures and highs and lows of court life, he is probably best known for introducing the humble potato and highly addictive tobacco to these isles. Admittedly, they are not obvious bedfellows, seldom mixing in the same circles unless you were in a pub pre-smoking ban, enjoying a packet of crisps and a cigarette! Which brings us, dear reader, to the heart of our story...

What is less known about Sir Walter is that he was also a scholar and writer and that he was reportedly involved in the inception of a drinking

society in the early 1600s, initially known as the Friday Street Club due to its location on Friday Street in Cheapside. The location of the club was the infamous Mermaid Tavern, and despite the tavern burning to the ground in the Great Fire of London in 1666, today it enjoys a place in literary history as the birthplace of the literary club. Such clubs truly flourished in the eighteenth century, most notably with the likes of The Kit Cat Club, Scriblerus Club and Johnson's Literary Club (and reportedly, many of these did a roaring trade in bar snacks!).

The Friday Street Club taking its name from the location of the Mermaid Tavern was something of a trend in historic London. In fact, some might say that parts of Cheapside were not only literary but literal too. Cheapside itself takes its name from 'chepe', a Saxon word for a market. The first church of St Mary-le-Bow was built in around 1080 and its name probably refers to the bowed shape of the arches supporting its undercroft, which were a novelty at that time.

Side streets across Cheapside acquired names that indicated their early specialisations: fishmongers traded on Friday Street (supporting the religious tradition of eating fish on Fridays), while Honey Lane, Milk Street and Wood Street are self-explanatory. Arguably a lesson for modern day town planners – this sort of 'signage' would certainly help people find their way around!

But we digress - back to the Friday Street Club, which was also known rather snappily as the 'Fraternitie of Sireniacal Gentlemen'. The club met on the first Friday of every month, and attracted actors, playwrights, authors with many esteemed members including John Donne, Ben Jonson, Francis Beaumont and of course Sir Walter. Many believe William Shakespeare himself was a member, but alas, there is no documented evidence of this. However, Shakespeare was a friend of the landlord of the Mermaid and he was also known to regularly engage in lively exchanges of 'wit combats' with Ben Jonson, so it is perhaps not too much of a stretch to think of the Bard himself frequenting such a club.

The tavern's Elizabethan landlord William Williamson, 'was known as an honest man and of good government and would not suffer music and illegal games in his house'. His apprentice, William Johnson, who was an acquaintance of William Shakespeare having acted as a trustee on a purchase of a house in Blackfriars, took over the lease of the tavern around 1605.

It is likely that both Williamson and Johnson, worked hard to secure the custom of an elite

clientele by keeping a reputable establishment, known for the quality of its food, drink and company.

The Mermaid's reputation was such that it survived for centuries – it certainly must have been some place to visit! William Gifford, Ben Jonson's nineteenth century editor, revisited the legend of the Mermaid... 'Of this Club, which combined more talent and genius, perhaps, than ever met together before or since', stating that Jonson 'regularly repaired' with the great literary men of the times.

The Mermaid has inspired many a poet over the years. Francis Beaumont, was a poet and dramatist in Elizabethan England famous for his collaborations with John Fletcher. He is buried in Poets' Corner in Westminster Abbey at the entrance to St Benedict's chapel near Chaucer's monument. Having departed London, Beaumont wrote to his friend Ben Jonson recalling his times at the Mermaid and the lack of excitement in his new rural abode...

*Methinks a the little wit I had it lost  
Since I saw you; for wit is like a rest  
Held up at tennis, which men do best  
With the best gamesters. What things we have  
seen  
Done at the Mermaid! heard words that have  
been  
So nimble, and so subtle flame,  
As if that every one (from whence they came)  
Had meant to put his whole wit in a jest,  
And had resolved to live a fool the rest  
Of his dull life.*

This poem inspired another, written more than two centuries later. The famous poet, John Keats, resided in lodgings in Cheapside for a brief period. He must have mused long and often about the kindred spirits who had gone before him in the local area, perhaps even haunting the lodging that Keats found himself in when he wrote 'Lines on the Mermaid Tavern' in February 1818. Published in 1920, this is a poem where Keats is comparing the world to Elysium, the abode of the blessed after death, according to classical mythology. He is wondering where the souls of the dead poets have gone and asking, revealingly, was it better than the Mermaid Tavern?



Shakespeare and his contemporaries at the Mermaid Tavern. Painting by John Faed, 1851.

*Souls of Poets dead and gone,  
 What Elysium have ye known,  
 Happy field or mossy cavern,  
 Choicer than the Mermaid Tavern?  
 Have ye tippled drink more fine  
 Than mine host's Canary wine?  
 Or are fruits of Paradise  
 Sweeter than those dainty pies  
 Drest as though bold Robin Hood  
 Would, with his maid Marian,  
 Sup and bowse from horn and can.  
 I have heard that on a day  
 Mine host's sign-board flew away,  
 Nobody knew whither, till  
 An astrologer's old quill  
 To a sheepskin gave the story,  
 Said he saw you in your glory,  
 Underneath a new old sign  
 Sipping beverage divine,  
 And pledging with contented smack  
 The Mermaid in the Zodiac.  
 Souls of Poets dead and gone,  
 What Elysium have ye known,  
 Happy field or mossy cavern,  
 Choicer than the Mermaid Tavern?*

Fast forward 100 years since Keats' musings, and it seems fitting that today, Cheapside is at the forefront of the City of London's charge to evolve into a 24/7 destination with culture, leisure and hospitality at the heart of its offer. Despite the set back of the COVID pandemic, the area is bursting with new cultural destinations and world-class hospitality. Rather than thinking this is a recent innovation for Cheapside, it's satisfying to know that today's venues continue a tradition started by The Mermaid over 400 years ago (and the bar snacks have improved considerably).

The Ned is a fine example. Occupying a building built between 1924 and 1939 as the Midland Bank HQ, it may well have been the grandest bank on the face of the earth. When Soho House's Nick Jones saw the building in 2012, he knew immediately he wanted to do something with it. He joined up with Andrew Zabler, CEO of the Seydell Group, which owns the NoMad Hotel in New York and the rest is history.

Four years and £200 million later, you step off the street not into a hotel lobby but into a vast and outrageously grand food court – it's vibrant,



**Shakespeare and Johnson at The Mermaid, unknown artist**

bustling and brings visceral London to life in vivid technicolour. There is seating here for 850 and six restaurants set amidst the historic 3000 sq mt former banking hall. Lutyens Grill, the Californian-inspired Malibu Kitchen and the brasserie, Millie's Lounge, in particular, are exemplary. It may be located in a former bank, but there's no stuffiness to be found here – this is culture meeting commerce in action.

As the team at The Ned put it themselves, "The City is as busy as Soho and much better looking; it's the capital's engine room for commerce but also has more than its fair share of culture for one square mile."

A stone's throw from The Ned is the Bloomberg Arcade, another new foodie destination home to nine independent restaurants, public art and a pedestrianised haven in the heart of the Square Mile. The arcade itself is built on a site of rich Roman history, the true extent of which was revealed during the construction of Bloomberg's European Headquarters on Queen Victoria Street.

More than 14,000 Roman artefacts were uncovered during the excavation, some of which are now on display just metres away at London Mithraeum Bloomberg SPACE. Here, you can experience the restored Roman Temple of Mithras and enjoy contemporary art commissions responding to the site's unique history.

Speaking at the time of the opening of the Arcade in 2017, Michael R. Bloomberg, Founder of Bloomberg L.P. and 108th Mayor of New York City, said: “Bloomberg Arcade reflects London’s incredible diversity and our commitment both to our employees and the City. It will be a culinary destination unlike any other in the City, and it will bring new jobs and life to the area.”

Destinations like The Ned and Bloomberg Arcade, alongside the revamped Royal Exchange, Madison, One New Change and many others, were leading the charge across Cheapside, attracting a younger, more diverse customer base and changing perceptions of the City. COVID hit the pause button, but there is momentum building again with many firmly believing that the collision of commerce and culture is the key to the area’s reemergence as a global powerhouse.

The City of London’s Culture and Commerce Taskforce was established in the wake of the pandemic by the Lord Mayor William Russell, in partnership with Culture Mile, and this ongoing cross-sector programme supports, delivers and champions projects that unite business and the creative industries for mutual positive benefit. The Fuelling Creative Renewal report published earlier this year by the Taskforce sets out the crucial role that the creative industries can play in London’s recovery - reanimating spaces in unique ways that attract people back, equipping people with the skills needed for employment and innovation, and building the connections required internationally for London to remain a global hub for commerce and culture.

So, these are exciting times for Cheapside. Cheapside, the original marketplace – where ideas, wit and arguments were exchanged alongside all wordly goods.

The Mermaid Tavern may be long gone, but Cheapside is today home to and will continue to attract a new generation of artists, poets, playwrights, thinkers, and intellectuals. People continue to be attracted by the marketplace of the area, whether that be the traditional commerce the Square Mile is famous for around the world, or work colleagues huddled in a pub putting the world to rights on a Friday night...over a packet of crisps of course.

