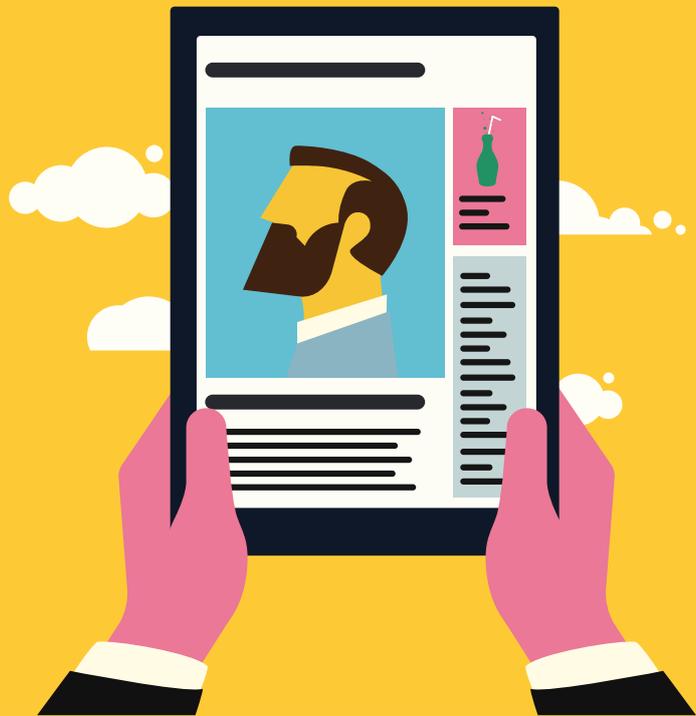


THE COMMUTER CLUB



The hidden gems of Holborn and Clerkenwell

From theatres and churches to founding hospitals, Holborn and Clerkenwell and the surrounding areas are rich in history. Join journalist and author Victor Keegan and OnLondon for a journey around some of the hidden gems of this fascinating area.

The Red Bull Theatre

Strolling along St John Street in Clerkenwell near its junction with Aylesbury Street, there is an archway that leads to an alley called Hayward's Place. Tread nostalgically, for this is the site of the Red Bull theatre that flourished, not without controversy, from the reign of James I in 1606 throughout the Civil War and its aftermath, a period which saw the complete closure of most of other London theatres until the Restoration in 1660. A recently-installed plaque high up on a wall reminds passers-by of the Red Bull's hidden history. The arch may well be where the original entrance to the theatre was.

We have been living through an extraordinary period of archaeological discovery, which has seen the buried remains of Shakespearean theatres such as the Rose Playhouse on

Bankside and the Curtain in Shoreditch revealed. But no one has yet got round to unearthing the Red Bull. That is largely because it has been completely built over, but also because it was never considered to be in the same league as the others – its performances and its audiences were thought too rumbustious and even vulgar.

The Red Bull's reputation may have had something to do with being situated along St John Street, where cattle were driven to Smithfield market through an area as famous for its brothels and prisons as its religious houses. Its reputation is in the process of reappraisal though, thanks mainly to research by Dr Eva Griffith, whose book, *A Jacobean Company and its Playhouse*, argues convincingly that the theatre's low status was during its later period, following ten years of being the home of Queen Anne of Denmark's Men, a parallel group to Shakespeare's troupe The Kings' Men. Anne was the wife of James I, and therefore unlikely to have lent her name to anything too unsavoury.

Griffith also claims that the Red Bull had a larger capacity than the famous Globe theatre, which could hold nearly 3,000 spectators. It was a converted inn yard in the open air rather than a purpose-built theatre like the Globe or the Rose. Anne's men also performed for a while at the new indoor Cockpit theatre in Drury Lane, which opened in 1616, though with mixed results.

Old Holborn

The timbered building on the south side of High Holborn known as Staple Inn, famous for being pictured on Old Holborn tobacco packets (below, right), is often presumed to be an intact survivor of Tudor London. Not really. Though listed and of Tudor origin, it has become an example of what archaeologists call “virtually modern fakes”, with the beams and woodwork put in comparatively recently as part of a reconstruction following wartime bomb damage. If you want to see a bit of really old Holborn, walk a few yards down the road towards Fetter Lane to a small doorway marked Barnard’s Inn (below, left), which dates back to at least 1400. It sports signs on either side saying “Gresham College”, revealing it to be the home of a unique educational institution which is still going strong after over 400 years.



Staple Inn, Old Holborn

Barnard’s Inn, like Staple Inn, was one of the old Inns of Chancery – sort of prep schools for lawyers wanting to join one of the Inns of Court, such as Lincoln’s Inn. Within, stands Barnard’s Inn Hall, whose structure today is much as it was in the 15th century.

The hall is all that remains of the mansion of John Mackworth, the Dean Of Lincoln who died in 1451. Archaeologist John Schofield describes it as “the only surviving medieval secular timber structure of domestic scale in the City”. The

roof timbers contain the last crown posts, a specialised wood structure, in the whole of London.

Bloomsbury Church Spire

It is easy to mistake St George’s church in Bloomsbury Way for a spire with a church hanging underneath it. Nicholas Hawksmoor’s English baroque masterpiece, consecrated in 1730, was necessarily constructed in cramped surroundings, because there were already buildings on either side. That is why from most approaches, and especially from the British Museum, all you see is the spire until you arrive at the church itself.

But what spire! It is a building in its own right. Its sculptures of lions and unicorns – two of each, all recent recreations of the originals standing more than ten feet high – represent the conflict between Jacobites and the Crown. Far above them stands a statue of George – not Saint George, the founding father of the church, but King George I, the reigning monarch of the time.

The only statue of that King George in London, it looks almost like a case of product placement, as it is highly unusual to have a monarch on top of a church, let alone one dressed in a Roman toga bestriding a stretched pyramid above a mini-temple (photo below, left). Not even Henry VIII thought of that. Unsurprisingly, the Church Commissioners were reluctant to pay for such a frivolous work, but eventually gave way. It is, to say the least, distinctive.

Most people first come across the spire unknowingly when they look at William Hogarth’s famous apocalyptic painting Gin Lane (1751). It is a picture of a city imploding under the effects of cheap gin, thanks to William of Orange’s promotion of Dutch spirits. But it also shows a beacon of hope in the background – yes, it is the spire of St George’s.

The church was partly built in order that the “better sort” could have a place of worship away from the nearby St Giles, which was right in the middle of the rookery of which Gin Lane was a part. This was not a convenient place for the carriages of the affluent, who were arriving in

droves at newly-fashionable Bloomsbury, to linger.

One of the numerous people to be fascinated by Hawksmoor's spire was the artist J M W Turner. He used his own drawings of it to illustrate the first perspective lecture he gave at the Royal Academy in January 1811, which discussed the effect of viewing the spire from the ground at different angles.

London's First Famous Foundling Hospital

In 1719, a man went to live in the maritime village of Rotherhithe by the Thames to enjoy a well-earned retirement after a career as a shipwright, running his own business in the new colony of America. Although the business was successful for most of its time, in the end it left him poor. But this was no ordinary man. It was Thomas Coram, one of the most extraordinary people in Georgian England.

On his frequent walks around London, Coram was stunned by the number of dead and dying babies, mainly illegitimate, he saw abandoned – can you believe it? – in the streets and on dust heaps. Horrifying statistics indicated that in crowded workhouses babies aged under two years died at a rate almost 99 per cent. They were described as “Britain's dying rooms”. One report suggested that in Westminster Parish only one in 500 foundlings survived.

It is a sobering thought that at a time when Britain was rightly castigated for its inhuman treatment of slaves abroad, it was also allowing its own unwanted children to die on the streets of its capital. Although he was 54 years old – a good age in those days – Coram decided to do something about it. And he did. Thanks to his untiring efforts and refusal to take “no” for an answer, the Foundling Hospital became what must have been the most successful charity in the country.

The Hospital was eventually built in Bloomsbury at Lamb's Conduit Field, on the spot now called Coram's Fields (main picture). This followed unsuccessful efforts to get it located in Montagu House, where the British Museum is today. What is less well known is that Bloomsbury is not where the institution was originally based. During its first and formative years it was located in Hatton Garden – before it became an international centre for gems – in a dwelling belonging to Sir Fisher Tench, the MP for Southwark. Tench had grown enormously rich on a range of activities including, it has to be said, the slave trade (though the Foundling Hospital was not in any way connected). William Hogarth's famous painting of Coram was presented to the Hospital while it was based at this temporary home.

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