

JOHN STOW AND HIS SURVEY

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Given at St. Andrew, Undershaft, at the Stow
Commemoration,

8th April, 1935.

THE distinguished Londoner whom we commemorate to-day, John Stow, was laid to rest in this church on 8th April, 1605, just three hundred years ago. He had lived some eighty years in this vicinity.

The main facts of his life are well known to us. His grandfather and father were citizens and tallow-chandlers of some substance, and they, with his great-grandfather, were all buried in what was then described as "the little green churchyard of St. Michael, Cornhill." John became a tailor, and after his apprenticeship was admitted to the freedom of the Merchant Taylors' Company in 1547. Starting business by Aldgate Pump, he seems to have been sufficiently successful to allow him to indulge his taste for learning and antiquities. He was led to take up history, and in 1565, at the age of forty, his *Summarie of Englyshe Chronicles* was published, and in the next year it was followed by an Abridgement, which ran to many editions, several of which, it may be noted, bore on their title-page the words: "Imprinted for the Company of Stationers." In 1580 he published his *Chronicles of England*, and twelve years later his more extensive *Annales of England* appeared.

After about twenty-five years he gave up business and devoted his life to his studies, facing and finally enduring poverty. His attainments and work brought him the friendship of many notable men, such as

Camden, Lambarde, the Recorder Fleetwood and John Dee, and the valuable patronage of the learned Archbishop Parker.

He was able to supplement his historical labours by occasional employments, e.g. as a Surveyor of Alehouses in 1584-85, and a Collector in his Ward (Lime Street) of the charges for a muster of 4,000 men for the Queen's service; and also in research work for the Corporation and for the Merchant Taylors' Company. The last body granted him pensions of £4 to £10 yearly in return. One is inclined to think that the extent of his poverty may have been a little exaggerated, as he was able to leave some small bequests, and his widow provided a handsome monument to his memory; but there is the well-known fact that King James granted him an authority to solicit alms.

In the sixteenth century topography was in its infancy. Leland's *Itinerary of England and Wales*, written in the thirties and forties, led the way; Harrison's *Description of Britain* followed in the seventies and was printed in Holinshed's *Chronicle*; Lambarde's *Topographical Dictionary* and his *Perambulation of Kent* were compiled about the same time; and the great Camden's *Britannia* was first published in 1586. These pioneer works were all of a general character, covering large districts, without going closely into local details.

Stow's great work, *A Survey of London*, which brings us here to-day, really struck out a new line, and formed a marked development in topographical writing. As he himself says, the idea was suggested by Lambarde's *Perambulation*, which appeared in 1574; and, I may add, perhaps—although to a less extent—by a twelfth-century document of which he had a copy, which gave a description of some main points about London and its governance and amenities. This was written by Wm. FitzStephen, a monk of Canterbury, and Stow printed it in his book.

Stow's *Survey* gives a full description and account

of the City, geographically and historically; its government, people and notabilities; and, ward by ward, its streets, even its courts and alleys; of its churches, with their memorials and other features and, it may be, their founders; and of other buildings and houses. As his latest and best biographer and editor, Mr. C. L. Kingsford, justly remarks: "In it Stow built himself a monument for all time and has left a record instinct with life. It is at once the summary of sixty observant years and a vivid picture of London as he saw it. Stow possessed in a peculiar degree the qualities necessary for such a work, and the time at which he wrote was exceptionally favourable. In his day he witnessed the passing of medievalism and the birth of the modern capital."

Born in 1525, in his youth and young manhood he had witnessed the pomp and power of prelates, nobles and monasteries; during his apprenticeship and after it he had experienced the power of the ancient Guilds; and he lived to see a fresh dispensation come into being. As with many of us now, green fields and pleasant walks of his youth had been replaced by streets and houses.

Stow's power of observation and retentive memory, his zeal for accumulating material and his capacity for handling it, were invaluable qualifications which, combined with his researches in the City Records, give his *Survey* its leading position as a unique topographical work. The first edition was published in 1598, and the second in 1603.

In so great a book we must expect some weaknesses, particularly when we take into account the position of historical and other research work at that period. For example, topographical writers naturally endeavour to explain the names of places they write about. In the sixteenth century philology was an unborn science; and, in fact, it is but recently that it has been realised, *first*, that the names of places, like other words, have

changed, and that the present spelling of a name may not be, nor even *indicate*, its original form; *secondly*, that our ancient records contain these names in thousands, written century by century by contemporary scribes in the spelling of the period, for perhaps 1,200 years; *thirdly*, that facility of access to our records has been enormously improved since the sixteenth century and, indeed, during the last sixty years; and *finally*, that in many instances the actual original form is found and may be interpreted by a knowledge of our language at that period. Consequently, guesses made at etymologies from the present spelling of a place-name are frequently far from the truth. This applies not only to sixteenth-century writers but to those of later dates, even to the present day.

Stow's explanations of the origins of his street-names have a good percentage of success, as in many cases they are associated with facts of then recent date; but some of his non-successes call for correction by reason of their having been widely accepted and copied by later writers. For instance, Aldgate was never Ealdgate as he assumes. In the twelfth century it was Alegate, and in the eleventh century Ealsegate—probably from a personal name Ealh. It was sometimes called the Eastgate. Similarly, Stow's Ealdersgate for Aldersgate is wrong. The original was Ealdredesgate (c. 1000) from the personal name Ealdred; and it modified through Aldredsgate and Aldresgate to Aldersgate.

To mention two other bad guesses. 1. -bourne in the name "Langbourne," "-bourne" proves to be a corruption of -bord. In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries the name was spelt Longbord, Longebrod and Langebord, which indicate an original "Long bard" (long-beard), the well known early name for the Lombards. The Lombard merchants who settled thereabouts are also commemorated by Lombard Street. Stow's "bourne" is imaginary. 2. Holborn: Stow's "Oldborne" never

appears in our records, in which the name is always Holeburn and the like, back to the tenth century ("Hole-burne": stream in the hollow); and the course of the stream is clearly recorded as identical with that of the Fleet and the Turnmill brook, which ran in a hollow from Hampstead to the Thames.

Place-name origins and etymologies, however, are now being thoroughly investigated on scientific lines, county by county, by the English Place-Name Society, and London and Middlesex names will be fully dealt with during the next few years. Meanwhile, guesses from sixteenth-century and later spellings should be regarded with caution.

The small lapses I have indicated are, after all, of minor importance in appraising Stow's work. His most striking and lasting value is in his contemporary descriptions and facts and his then recent history.

Of the modern editions of Stow's *Survey*, that by the late C. L. Kingsford is outstanding. It was published in two volumes in 1908, and it gives a carefully collated and authoritative text, copiously and excellently annotated, with pertinent additional facts from further research in records, checking and elucidating passages in the *Survey*.

Stow may justly be regarded as a great Londoner, and it is fitting that our City should recognise his worth as it does, by the presence here to-day of its chief magistrate and head, for in honouring this worthy son of London, we honour our great City and ourselves.

We reverently place his ashes in a special niche in our Garden of Rest and Remembrance.