

# JOHN STOW AND THE WELFARE SERVICES

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THE first survey of London, the work of the citizen in whose memory we are gathered here, was a private venture, and that itself is significant. The latest survey of the City and its government, printed by order of the Corporation rather more than a year ago, is an official publication. "The keynote," says the preface to the last survey, "of the Corporation's work is still, as in ages past, service to the public." If it were necessary to seek a text for this short address, I should choose that saying, which is by no means a recording of the obvious. A critical commentator, not unfamiliar with some of the less creditable passages in London's story, might be tempted to remark, "Much, of course, depends upon how widely or narrowly you define public."

I shall not attempt a definition. But if anyone needs to be reminded of the impressive range of the current services, I would only ask him to read through the items in the contents page of the last survey, and then look at the book itself. If he wishes to see these services in historical depth, he ought to turn to the pages of the earlier survey—the patient work of John Stow.

As it happens, this year we can commemorate not only the life and work of John Stow, but also (in view of certain incidents in which he took an obvious pride, and helped to put into the historical record) the four hundredth anniversary of an important turning point in the City's development.

I refer to the City's sudden assumption in 1552 of corporate responsibility, within the four corners of a broad scheme, for what we should to-day call the social services. Stow's interest in these matters comes out in his Chronicle and as it were between the lines of the topographical sections of the Survey of London. He would undoubtedly have written more on the machinery of town management, but he thought James Dalton, an under-sheriff, would have done it. When Dalton died, with the work unfinished, Stow collected his own earlier notes in

order to write the additional chapters for the second edition; "but being," he says, "by the good pleasure of God, visited with sickness, such as my feet, which have borne me many a mile, have of late years refused, once in four or five months, to convey me from my bed to my study, and therefore could not do as I would." The planning of the *Survey* had been the work of his maturity, and since it was based on personal perambulations, it had cost him something in shoe leather. And now, an old tired man in his seventies, after a lifetime of devotion to chronicling the history of his nation and, in particular, the city of his birth and upbringing, he left the last task unfinished.

1552 has been chosen as the foundation year of Christ's Hospital: the quatercentenary of the school is now upon us. About the early stages of the Grey Friars estate transaction there is to be sure some obscurity; a difficulty about the transference following the dissolution that has caused some to regard Henry VIII, that savage destroyer of amenities, rather than his successor, as the founder of the famous City school. The real founders were however the magistrates of the City and the Bishop of London.

Upon this old city which neglected its drains and was prodigal in church building the effects of the Reformation must have been widespread; but whether the disbandment of the London religious communities and the collapse of their charitable organisations, with their hospital beds and grammar classes and song schools, really made much difference to the condition of the poorer levels among the people we do not know, for we are ignorant about the effectiveness of these ancient charities. What the City's governors seem to have felt at the time was that something valuable had gone which had enabled them to shelve their responsibilities. Now no cushion any longer existed between those who came to grief in the battle of life and a prospect of utter misery. Moreover the London authorities had been bothered by the problem of professional beggars and looked for an excuse to put down casual almsgiving.

The dissolution of the monasteries was thus the signal for activity. Could the King be persuaded to hand over or sell the sites and endowments of some of these religious bodies? Henry took note of the suggestions, but he handled the items piecemeal. And he seems to have procrastinated; it has been suggested that he was striving with the City fathers for better bargains. When he died in 1547 no practical start had been

made with the Londoners' new deal, except in the case of St. Bartholomew's—otherwise the house of the poor in Smithfield—which was to be refounded as a general hospital. The house of Bethlem, described by Stow as "an hospital for distracted people" was in process of being taken over by the City Chamberlain when Edward VI succeeded his father.

The initiative in the great drive was taken by the bishop of London, Nicholas Ridley. Who stimulated him into action is not known. But the occasion was dramatic. Soon after the judicial murder in 1552 of Protector Somerset on Tower Hill, which Stow records with interesting detail about the crowd's behaviour, the bishop preached a sermon before the young king about the care of the sick and unemployed. To the surprise of some, the king sent for him after the service, discussed the outline of a project and made him wait whilst a letter for the king's signature was prepared for him to take to Sir Richard Dobbs, the mayor, urging him to proceed on the lines to be indicated to him by the bishop. There followed conferences and committees, working parties and reports. And the result was a general civic development plan for the treatment of poverty, with a financial scheme attached, and a pension plan—all centred upon the institutional framework of what came to be known as the royal hospitals: St. Thomas's for the wounded ex-service men and aged civilians; the old palace of Bridewell, a present from the young king, as a reformatory for undisciplined adults and a trade school for the young; and the central Grey Friars property north of Newgate as a home for orphan children—within a few months to be converted into a school, the only one among our great public schools which has always maintained its character as a charity.

John Stow has described the preparations in his *Chronicles* and in his *Survey*, and in the former, under July, 1552, he speaks of the work on the Christ's Hospital and St. Thomas's sites; and then a little lower down, in the silly season, between paragraphs about the birth of monsters and the taking of great fishes called "Whirlepoles" at Gravesend:

"This month of August began the great provision for the poor in London, towards which every man was contributory, and gave certain money in hand, and covenanted to give a certain weekly."

And then, in connection with the 1552 Christmas Day celebrations, when the Lord Mayor and aldermen rode in procession

to Paul's, and boys and girls of Christ's Hospital in their liveries—note the two sexes—are described; and we are even able to calculate from the particulars given by Stow the ratio of staff to children, and to note the existence of a medical staff of two physicians and four surgeons.

This is what was happening. Almost the first among European cities to take such action, London was in 1552 setting up a lay organisation of publicly owned institutions, governed by committees of elected councillors, under a considered policy for the management of its social services. I should like to be able to describe the finances of the scheme, especially the new poor rate—itself a novelty in England—but we have at least time to note the existence of a nice balance between legal compulsion and guided charity which has characterised our public provision ever since. London in fact set a quite remarkable example to the State, which was closely followed by parliament many years later, in respect of rate collection and the intelligent analysis of a complex social problem; and moreover an example to other towns of the day in its elaborate workhouse organisation.

The conscientious and somewhat unemotional John Stow provides part of the evidence for all this. The facts are given plainly as he observes them, with thoroughness, with little attempt at praise or blame. We see in his pages the beginning of some of the activities of the modern welfare state—indeed the most critical stage in its slow evolution. Though there are some among our City governors who may not heartily approve all the features of the tremendous sequel, they can be proud and grateful for the lively and almost precocious civic sense which laid the foundations. It is now for us to honour the historian of London who helped to make so many of these deeds of his contemporaries known to the world, and to deepen the love which we have for our City.