

JOHN STOW COMMEMORATION SERVICE

THE annual service at St. Andrew's Undershaft took place on Thursday, May 8, when the Lord Mayor (Sir William Waterlow) and the Sheriffs attended in state. They were accompanied by the City Officials, and were welcomed by Bishop Perrin, who conducted the service, by the Alderman of Aldgate Ward and his Deputy, by the Churchwardens and by the officials of the London and Middlesex Archaeological Society. The choir of the Baltic Exchange led the singing, Major Hoby read the lesson, and Major Brett-James gave the address on the life and work of John Stow. After the service Bishop and Mrs. Perrin and Major and Mrs. Brett-James had the honour of lunching at the Mansion House. At the end of this report we print the full address, which was delivered in accordance with our annual custom.

'One of the most moving passages in the whole of the Bible is that chapter in the Epistle to the Hebrews, in which the writer stimulates the patriotism of his countrymen by summarizing their country's history in a list of the saints and heroes of faith. If such a list were to be compiled for London, it would surely be impossible to exclude from it the name of John Stow, citizen and merchant tailor of London and her first real historian. Stow was not the first to write about London. Others had told some portion of the tale before. We read both fact and fiction as to London's early years in the pages of writers so far apart as Tacitus and Geoffrey of Monmouth, and the *Liber Albus* of one of London's worthiest citizens, John Carpenter, is replete with laws and customs, and gives us a vivid insight into the life of his times. Stow himself incorporated into his survey the story of Fitz Stephen, whose description of London in the time of Becket is unique; and in the

wonderful collection of Letter Books, Journals and Repertories, so expertly preserved in the City's treasure house at the Guildhall, and in many an anonymous chronicle, we can delve into the past and find fresh material every time we try. But it was Stow who first turned into a continuous narrative and description all that he could find of London's story, and he did it with a skill that even to-day amazes us. His most industrious and expert editor, Charles Lethbridge Kingsford, who on more than one occasion addressed you in this place, found singularly little to correct and amend. Not that Stow was infallible. How should he have been? But he made it his business to verify, as far as he could, all that he mentioned, and if he occasionally accepted picturesque fables, who shall blame him?

John Stow lived in a period of more than usual interest, when great changes had already taken place in London, and others still more momentous and drastic were impending. The London of Shakespeare's youth, which is in the main the London that figures in Stow's *Survey*, was a half-timbered, red-roofed mediaeval town, with spacious gardens behind the houses, and with the open country almost at everyone's door or within a few minutes' walk. It was disfigured, as many contemporary writers tell us, by the ruins of a multitude of churches and monasteries, hitherto the homes of friars, monks and nuns; and Stow was old enough to remember the days before the great pillage, and he has given us an imperishable picture of London both before and after that great watershed of London's history. The two great physical changes in London have been the "Great Pillage" and the "Great Fire," and it is fortunate indeed that we are able to reconstruct the London of earlier days from the maps of Saxton, Norden and Speed, the picture plans of Wyngaerde and, later on, the drawings of Wenceslaus Hollar. These give us some slight idea of London before the Dissolution and a very clear notion of London before the Fire. But it is to

the *Survey* of John Stow that we look chiefly for a detailed description of 16th century London. Stow was no dry-as-dust. Many are the personal touches with which he enlivens his story, and some of the best have often been quoted in this place before. Here is one, in speaking of Dowgate, where the Walbrook ran precipitously into the Thames. "In 1574, on the 4th of September, after a strong shower of rain, a lad of the age of 18 years, minding to have leapt over the channel, was taken by the feet and borne down with the violence of that narrow stream, and carried towards the Thames with such a violent swiftness, as no man could rescue or stay him, till he came against a cartwheel that stood in the water gate, before which time he was drowned and stark dead." And again he gives a personal reminiscence of a great man of his time—"I myself have oft seen, at the Lord Cromwell's Gate in London, more than 200 persons served twice every day with bread, meat and drink sufficient; for he observed that ancient and charitable custom as all prelates, noblemen or men of honour and worship had done before him." He speaks in his description of Aldgate Ward of a "fair house given by Henry VIII to Mistress Cornwallis and her heirs in reward of fine puddings by her made, with which she had presented him. Such was the princely liberality of those times." And of this very parish of St. Andrew Undershaft he writes of a water-pump "for the placing of which they were forced to dig more than 2 fathoms deep, before they came to any main ground, where they found a hearth made of Briton, or rather Roman tiles, every tile half a yard square and about 2 inches thick"; and finally of St. Michael's lane in Candlewick Ward, he tells of a gun which went off in the house of a Dutchman and set fire to a barrel of gunpowder, blowing up 4 houses, shattered divers others, and slew 11 men and women. It is these trivial touches which add so much to the accuracy of the picture which Stow's *Survey* presents to us.

John Stow was born in 1525, the year of the battle of Pavia, in which Francis the First of France was taken prisoner by the soldiers of Charles the Emperor, with such epoch-making effects on the history of Europe. He was four years old when Wolsey and Campeggio sat at Blackfriars to consider the question of Henry VIII's first divorce. He was 11 when a copy of Coverdale's Bible was placed by the King's orders in every church in England. He must have seen the execution of the Carthusian Martyrs under Henry VIII; he knew of Somerset's destruction of churches to build his great west-end palace; he saw the fire of Smithfield lit by order of Mary of ill memory; he lived through the spacious days of Queen Elizabeth, and witnessed the rejoicings when the Armada was defeated with the aid of our "ancient and unsubsidized allies, the Winds," and he lived long enough into the reign of James I to be allowed by that ungenerous monarch to beg.

Besides his *Survey*, for which we do well to honour him, Stow also produced *Annals and Summaries of English History*, which ran into 11 editions in his life time, and evidently became a standard text-book for Elizabethan schoolboys. To Stow we are indebted for an edition of *Chaucer*, perhaps the greatest of all native Londoners, corrected, as he writes, and "twice increased through mine own painful labours, and beautified with notes."

It is right to commemorate Stow, for there was nothing he enjoyed more than to record the good deeds of others in his *Survey*. His London story is full of the worthy deeds of citizens, both of his own day and of earlier times. If he were to revisit this planet and walk about the streets of London, he would be amazed at its tremendous growth and gigantic size, and he would compare the small city of 150,000 as he knew it with the metropolis of 7½ millions to-day. He would be bewildered at the traffic of the streets and would find the motor buses and lorries worse than the whirlicotes,

coaches and carroaches of his day. And if, in self defence he were to seek refuge in his old parish church, he would be equally surprised and delighted to find this congregation here assembled, with the Lord Mayor and Sheriffs present in state to do him honour.

He would find London changed in many things, but at heart essentially the same; in that to-day, as in the days of FitzAlwyn, Whittington, Gresham, Pepys, Wilkes and many another, it still inspires in its sons and daughters a loyalty and an affection which show themselves in lives of ungrudging and disinterested public service.'