# JOHN STOW COMMEMORATION

at the Church of St. Andrew, Undershaft,

on Tuesday, 28th April, 1936

ADDRESS BY CHARLES W. F. GOSS, F.S.A.,
Chairman and Vice-President.

THE first quarter of the sixteenth century, a period remarkable for the general development of English genius, was peculiarly distinguished by the birth of John Stow, who lived and laboured during five reigns as one of the most diligent and indefatigable collectors of English history and antiquities.

He was born in the year 1525 in the adjoining parish of St. Michael, Cornhill, where lie the bodies of his father, grandfather and great-grandfather. His early life was cast in one of the most stormy periods recorded in our history, but of his childhood and early education we can learn very little.

The earliest record we have of John Stow is that of him trudging along to a farm in Goodman's Fields, near the Minories, to fetch the family morning milk. Next we accompany the six-year-old boy to his father's garden in Throgmorton Street and picture the little fellow labouring under intense indignation at the great wrong perpetrated by the ill-fated Thomas Cromwell, who, for the purpose of enlarging his own pleasure garden and without previous warning, encroached upon that belonging to the boy's father by removing thereon a house that happened to obstruct Cromwell's view. This incident, showing the utter disregard of the rights of citizens and of justice, and the violent measures adopted by men of that time, may account for John Stow's frequently expressed dislike of all injustice and wrongs.

Ere he was out of his teens he had witnessed the dissolution of London's religious houses; the conversion of St. Bartholomew's monastery into a hospital; the founding of Christ's Hospital; the printing of the first authorised edition of the Bible; the first paving of the City streets; and the beheading on Tower Green of Thomas Cromwell, who, nine years earlier, had wronged his father.

Cornhill at that time was an important trade centre, and there Stow's father and grandfather followed the calling of a tallow chandler. Apparently young Stow was taken into his father's business, but shortly afterwards he left it to serve his apprenticeship as a tailor, for we find him plying his needle in the service of one John Bully, a master tailor. At what age John finished his apprenticeship and started as a journeyman there is no certain proof but we do know that he was admitted to the Freedom of the Worshipful Company of Merchant Taylors in November, 1547, and that two years later, when he was twenty-four years of age, he had already established a business for himself in a house which stood on the site of an ancient chapel founded in the twelfth century, and dedicated to St. Michael the Archangel, immediately facing the well—now known as Aldgate Pump—for he records, incidentally, that in 1549 a Romford bailiff was executed upon a gibbet on the pavement in front of his house, a not unusual occurrence in the sixteenth century.

It is almost certain that Stow married about the time he started his business for, exactly twenty years later, he speaks of his three marriageable daughters. He now becomes lost to us for a period of twelve years while carrying on his tailoring, which was then a fairly lucrative calling, and his success was such as to enable him to acquire a considerable collection of books on divinity, history and poetry, to which he diligently applied himself during his leisure hours, particularly to a careful study of the early poets, which evidently served him as both

exercise and recreation, and by the time he had reached the age of thirty-three he had transcribed the poems of John Lydgate and other learned writers. This, his first love, resulted three years later in the publication of *The Woorkes of Geffrey Chaucer, newly printed, with divers addicions, whiche were never in printe before.* This was the fourth collected edition, but, notwithstanding the title, Stow only included previously printed poems of Chaucer's.

He was an unwearied reader, perusing everything that attracted his attention, and although he never entirely forsook his studies in poetic literature, he now, at the age of thirty-six, displayed a passion for the study of British history and antiquities, his only real pursuit during the succeeding years and his ripe old age.

It does not appear when his attention was first turned to the searching into records and original charters and to the work of transcribing historical manuscripts, for in his writings he varies the date, but he had, as early as 1562, begun his travels through England with the purpose of collecting material for his *Summarie*, and to that absorbing historical and antiquarian quest, his time and application were so closely devoted, that from that date he began to bestow very little of either upon his tailoring, thereby seriously endangering his means of earning a livelihood.

In 1565, when he was forty years of age, he published *A Summarie of Englyshe Chronicles*, a work that attracted great attention and criticism, and resulted in a long drawn out quarrel between himself and Richard Grafton, the chronicler and king's printer. In the following year he issued a second and enlarged edition as well as one in an abridged form, which he dedicated to the then Lord Mayor. The popularity of the *Summarie* was such that it passed through fourteen editions either in its complete or abridged state during his lifetime.

His passion for unearthing hidden historical treasures was unbounded, and he continued to travel on foot

throughout the kingdom searching for likely sources of information, examining, transcribing and extracting the historical matter contained in charters, deeds, records and registers housed in private libraries and cathedral churches, with a view to bringing together such material relating to the country as he esteemed worthy of being transmitted to posterity.

As a result of the dissolving hand of Henry VIII and the avarice of his ministers at the suppression of monasteries and religious houses, the dispersal of the contents of their valuable libraries proceeded like a devouring fire, and innumerable manuscripts of various kinds, many of them written by monks, became scattered throughout the land. While many were totally destroyed, others, fortunately, found their way into the hands of persons interested in antiquities, and ultimately into public and private collections. Stow seized upon this great opportunity to acquire by purchase, as far as his resources permitted, all that came his way in the shape of early printed books, parchments, charters and manuscripts. Others, which he was unable to purchase, he either transcribed in full, or made extensive extracts from.

When, at great cost, he had for a considerable period travelled the country in the prosecution of his researches he found himself sadly in need of money for his subsistence, and on the assumption that he would reap little profit for his industry, he was on the point of deserting his research work and applying himself more diligently to his trade. His munificent patron, Dr. Parker, Archbishop of Canterbury, himself an antiquary, who had manifested an almost fraternal attachment towards Stow, relieved his pecuniary wants, and not only prevailed upon him to continue his antiquarian pursuits but gave him a commission to carry out certain editorial work, which Stow performed with sedulous care under the Archbishop's directions.

These were troublous times for the country, due to

the Pope's emissaries sent to England to create disturbances in the Government, and like many another learned man Stow did not escape suspicion and danger. One of the stirring incidents of his life in those days of religious persecution occurred early in the year 1569, when, on the word of an informant, he fell under the suspicion of having a secret leaning towards popery by Queen Elizabeth's council, who expressed doubts about Stow's zeal for ancient books and manuscripts. He was called before the council and his house was searched for treasonable literature by the Chaplains of Grindal, then Bishop of London, but all that could be found was a collection of manuscripts, parchments, laboured transcriptions of an earnest antiquary, books on physic, surgery and a few early books on popery, which he had collected from time to time, for the purpose of his English Chronicles, upon the preparation of which he was then engaged. Although the charge of popish inclinations was not proceeded with, he was not yet free from suspicion, for in the following year his younger brother Thomas, owing to a long-standing family feud, falsely accused John to the Ecclesiastical Commissioners, and it was not until his house had been ransacked and his own writings seriously endangered with the object of producing the required evidence, that he was able successfully to confound his accusers.

This, although most disturbing, did not drive him off his studies, for he shortly afterwards decided definitely to abandon his trade, thus sacrificing the means of acquiring a comparatively easy competence and comfort in favour of pursuing his antiquarian researches. At the same time he removed from his house facing Aldgate Pump to take up his residence in Leadenhall Street, a little to the west of the church in which we are now gathered, and there we find the chronicler poring over his accumulation of books, parchments and other manuscripts, assiduously translating, abstracting, collating and condensing the substance of the early annalists.

With the death of his benefactor, the then Archbishop of Canterbury in 1575, Stow was deprived of his one strong supporter, and was left to struggle with his former financial difficulties, but notwithstanding his straitened circumstances he published an expansion of his *Summarie* under the title of *The Chronicles of England from Brute to 1580*, in the compilation of which he had spent some years, and, in 1592, his reputation was further advanced by the publication of his *Annales of England*, which, however, formed but part of the ambitious work Stow intended it to be in its completeness. The four editions of this work issued during his lifetime strikingly attest the estimate in which it was held, and the posthumous 1605 edition which he continued down to the 26th March, just ten days before his death, proves the perseverance of his labours, even while the spectre of poverty continuously haunted his study.

For more than forty years, in midst of writing and printing his other works he had studiously applied himself to the great task of compiling the English Chronicles *in extenso*, which, unfortunately, he did not live to see in print. He mentions its existence in the 1592 edition of the *Annales* as being a larger work on the history of England, and while it is true that he had published an abstract of it under the title of *Flores Historiarum*, the projected work in its complete form was withheld during his lifetime, and when his end came it reposed in his study ready for press. The fate and final disposal of that work as well as other manuscripts have been lost sight of and are still untraceable, a loss all antiquaries will ever lament. In the Harleian Collection, housed in the British Museum, however, there is preserved an extensive collection of miscellaneous manuscripts, some of them of a fragmentary nature, in Stow's neat handwriting, from which the extent of his industry and his wide antiquarian and historical knowledge may be tested, and which the enthusiast may rejoice to handle.

Though his works enjoyed a respectable demand, the profits were insufficient for the support of one who had sacrificed to his researches not only his trade but also other means of wordly gain. The extent of his earnings may be gathered from at least two entries in the records of the Stationers' Company, namely that—

> "John Stow received £3 and forty copies for his pains in *The Survey of London* and £1 and fifty copies for his pains in the *Brief Chronicle.*"

About the year 1580, conscious of his steadily narrowing means of subsistence, he had petitioned the Lord Mayor and Aldermen to grant him two freedoms of the City, and he received the appointment of Chronicler of the City of London. With what remuneration, if any, has not been made clear, but as the City Chronicler he had at least the liberty of access to the City records and archives.

It has been shown that for more than half the period of his life he had been rarely free from pecuniary embarrassment. In his closing years he was even more greatly harassed, and when that condition is the portion of a man of distinguished merit it has sometimes a very unhappy influence on his work, but poverty and old age did not for one moment damp the intellectual ardour of our remarkable antiquary, and he went on in spite of his difficulties and discouragements which would have broken the spirit and destroyed the strength of many. Yet Stow bore his misfortunes with equanimity and good humour and even jested with his poverty and gouty condition.

Above everything else he loved his native City of London, and from an early date he cherished the desire to record its history in its greatness and fullness. We may, therefore, justly consider ourselves fortunate that the attention of such an acute and patient observer was drawn to the fact that in his day there existed no regular or connected history of the City of London, and certainly nothing embodying, to any extent, personal

recollections of the scenes and events of that time. For the purpose of his *Survay of London* he visited every nook and corner of the City streets, noting everything of historical and topographical interest, with a view to confirming the evidence he had collected from various manuscripts, registers and records.

In the preparation of his *Survay*, that extraordinary monument of genius and masterly execution, he never permitted his enthusiasm for the fame of his beloved city, nor his imagination, to luxuriate in striking descriptions to the sacrifice of accuracy, when dealing with important events or minute details. He wrote with wonderful fidelity which gave to his history the highest value. He was essentially a man of facts, who wrote for the citizens of London, gathering together all the topographical information about the London as he saw it as a youth in the time of Henry VIII; what it became in his mature years in the time of Queen Elizabeth; as he saw it surrounded by the mediaeval wall; as Shakespeare and Ben Jonson saw it; the daily life of the people, their streets, their houses, various examples of the then existing architecture and ancient structures, many of them even in his day crumbling to pieces.

It is due to his researches that we are able to learn so much about the ancient history of the city which, with great labour, he had discovered treasured up in hidden manuscripts, many of them long since destroyed. It is to the keenness of his observations that we are able to visualise mediaeval London, as it appeared before it had been devastated by the Great Fire, sixty-eight years after the publication of his *Survay*, when almost every landmark he records was wiped out of existence. But for Stow we should to-day possess a very imperfect history of our City, for much that had happened during three-quarters of the sixteenth century would not have been recorded. Half a century after Stow's death Sir Roger Lestrange, the censor of the press of his time, stated that it was always a wonder to him that the very

best who had penned our history should have been a poor tailor—honest John Stow.

The first edition of the *Survay of London*, issued in the year 1598, was quickly exhausted, calling for a reprint in the following year. A second and enlarged edition, dedicated to the then Lord Mayor and Commonalty, Stow lived long enough to see through the press four years later, and had not ill-health and poverty cut short his useful labours, he would doubtless have given to the world a history considerably enlarged which he had projected. The *Survay* was a compact, small gothic black-letter quarto of 483 pages, and should not be confused with the large work generally known as Strype's Stow, in two royal folio volumes dated 1720 and 1754.

Stow had no pretence to rhetoric and his writings may display few graces of style, but they are plain and straightforward, and truth rather than embellishment was his paramount aim.

For the most part his *Survay* was original work, for there were then no calendars or records, as are available to the student to-day, to assist him. In the execution of any original work, errors must inevitably creep in, and it should not be a matter for very great surprise if Stow fell into a few, but whatever the errors may be, we find them generally accepted without question by later historians and, indeed, the result of recent antiquarian research largely confirms the extraordinary accuracy of his work. He had been charged with having placed too much reliance upon ancient fabulous statements, which were in his day commonly imposed upon writers less given to accuracy; but Stow was not easily beguiled into accepting supersititions and fables, for his extensive researches and wide reading helped him considerably to discriminate between fact and fiction.

Stow, to whom all later antiquarians are deeply indebted, had just claims upon the gratitude of City men and national patronage; but in his old age the

nation and the City he immortalised neglected him, so that in his changed circumstances he had to encounter the more constant and depressing affliction of poverty which overclouded the last months of his life, and in his 79th year his necessities were so pressing that he was permitted by letters patent, under the great seal of James I, to solicit charity as a reward for his labours and sacrifice during the period of forty-five years, to the neglect of his ordinary means of maintenance.

James I, himself an antiquary, prided himself on his erudition, a fashionable acquisition in those days, yet while being very liberal with his court favourites, men of learning, zeal and unsparing industry were sadly neglected and suffered to struggle through life in dire need. The licence authorised Stow or his accredited agent to collect alms at church doors from well-disposed people throughout the Kingdom, or as it is expressed in the licence, "to collect amongst our loving subjects." These letters patent, published by the clergy from the pulpit, produced so little that the privilege of being a licensed beggar was renewed to him for another year. In the Church of St. Margaret, Lothbury, three months before his death, it is on record that "There was gathered by the Kynges letter patent for John Stow, Cronaklemacker the sum of 5s. $3\frac{3}{4}$d." Such then was the remuneration for priceless labour over a period of nearly half a century.

His temperate and cheerful disposition are on record, and notwithstanding his misfortunes and poverty he maintained a fairly robust constitution; but in his latter days he was attacked with gout of more than usual severity which he endured with patience and cheerfulness. His remarkable powers of activity of mind remained unimpaired to the last, and when he perceived his end approaching he awaited it with calm resignation, but he was loth to say farewell, for he disclosed that his one regret was that he would not live long enough to see in print his projected enlarged edition of the *Survay*.

Amongst the few monuments that were spared to us by the devouring element of 1666 was that of the marble effigy of John Stow, elegant in workmanship and beauty of figure, where our antiquary is represented still sitting in the attitude of augmenting his *Survay of London*, just as when it was erected by his widow in the north aisle of this, the Church of St. Andrew Undershaft, above the spot where his remains were placed.

It is a happy thought that the monument erected to the memory of the man who so carefully built up and jealously preserved the history of our great city, as if to honour his labours, should have providentially escaped both the ravages of the Great Fire and time, while others that similarly escaped the Fire have in the main been allowed to suffer decay or become defaced.

So long as men are honoured for the great things they have done for their country, the name of Stow will be remembered with respect. His works have merited the commendation of past generations and the high and honourable place he holds amongst his contemporaries; but whatever measure of praise we are disposed to pay to the several works Stow had written or edited, each of them worthy of all respect and richly deserving of the gratitude of posterity, it is not for those great undertakings upon which he had been engaged for nearly half a century that we are alone indebted to our antiquary, and for which we are here gathered together to pay homage to Stow. If those were the only writings he had given to the world upon which to base his fame, however valuable and magnificent in conception, neither they nor the existence of the marble effigy in the north-east corner of the Church would call for the annual gathering of such an assembly as this, any more than a service to commemorate Camden, Lambarde, Leland or other antiquary would greatly concern us.

It is because of the curious and invaluable *Survay of London*, immeasurably superior to any other work he had undertaken. It is because of this, the first

history of our great and noble City, Stow's greatest performance, the fruit of long experience, personal observation and specific examination of innumerable manuscripts and records dealing with the antiquities of London from fabulous times, that we as London citizens maintain this annual service, inaugurated in the year 1924 by the London and Middlesex Archæological Society, to commemorate the life and work of our trustworthy, laborious and excellent antiquary, and to honour the man who gave us the results of his researches in a compendious and connecting form, the product of the remaining eight years of his life, which will for all time entitle him to the gratitude of historians and topographers of the City, for it is the foundation upon which all histories of London must be based, and which no historian can well afford to neglect.

After a period of nearly three and a half centuries it speaks well for the great interest displayed in our antiquary that his Worshipful the Lord Mayor, amidst the numerous calls upon him, should, with the Sheriffs, accompanied by the Aldermen and Members of the Court of Common Council, sacrifice their valuable leisure to attend this service each year to pay homage to their ancient "City Chronicler," as John Stow was known in his latter years, and to perform the pleasing ceremony of replacing with a new quill pen that which is now in the right hand of the effigy, placed there twelve months ago by his predecessor as Chief Magistrate of this City; and while we are grateful to you, my Lord Mayor, for your presence here to-day, perhaps I may be permitted to add with great respect, that this act of piety is no more than the honour due from the Chief Magistrate of the City of London to the greatest of her Chroniclers, who devoted such care to preserve the records of the early history of his native City.

May the memory of John Stow for all time be preserved in this ancient and renowned City of London.