JOHN STOW

An Address delivered at the Church of St. Andrew Undershaft on 15 April, 1964 in the presence of the Rt. Hon. Clement James Harman, Lord Mayor (locum tenens), on the occasion of the Society's Annual Stow Commemoration Service.

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We are gathered together today to commemorate John Stow, citizen and merchant taylor, once a worshipper in this very church. Born in 1525, the eldest child of Thomas Stow, citizen and tallow-chandler, he was in his very essence a Londoner. His father, his grandfather and his great grandfather lived and were buried in the parish of St. Michael, Cornhill, and John, the boy, was apprenticed within the city to John Bulley, a merchant taylor. Admitted to the freedom in 1547 he set up in business for himself, first not far from Aldgate and then within the parish in which we now are, there to live until his death in 1605 in his eightieth year.

'Tall of stature, lean of body and face—very sober, mild, and courteous'; he gave to his business less and less attention as he came under the spell of that historian's passion which has brought to him an immortality on earth denied to all but a handful of his contemporaries. It was probably in recognition of his *Chronicles of England* that his company honoured him with a pension, but it was at the age of 75 that he published his *Survey of London* and won for himself a reading public which has lasted from that day to this.

The tale of this man's life is well known and no words of mine can add to that knowledge. The best tribute I can pay to him and to his memory is to describe for you a little of the background against which he wrote. The Survey which he compiled, walking a little painfully through the streets and courts and alleys, was a survey of a London which was changing fast. He noted with distaste the spread of its houses and the encroachments made upon its surrounding fields. But such things had to be. All through his life, all London—the city, Southwark, Westminster and the out-parishes alike—had been in the throes of expansion. When he was a child they had held perhaps fifty to sixty thousand inhabitants. When he looked on them as an old man these figures had increased four-fold. Many things had combined to bring about this expansion, distasteful though it was to the antiquarian, backward-looking part of Stow's mind. The discovery of the Americas, the closing by the Turks of the overland route to the Indies, and the opening by the Portuguese of a new route round the Cape of Good Hope had helped to move Europe's centre of gravity from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic and the North Sea. England had gradually ceased to be a war-torn island at the far end of the trading world. The firm rule of the Tudors had brought internal stability and with it, the enhancement of the capital. The court and parliament could centre on London, and its citizens prospered on the trade they brought. Stow had turned to history for his main career, but, as a merchant taylor, he knew well the rich orders court patronage brought to those who

could satisfy both the courtiers' love of ostentation, and the determination, whatever the sumptuary laws, of the city wives not to be wholly outshone by those of Whitehall and St. James's.

Strength at home had meant greater strength abroad, and the citizen of Cheapside or Cornhill was often the merchant adventurer or the participant in the developing adventures to Russia or the Levant. It was no accident that Richard Hakluyt's *Voyages* begin in the period which saw Gresham found a Royal Exchange in which the growing community of London's merchants could meet and transact business.

That these merchants could do so, owed much to events at home and abroad, and of these the most important was, surely, that which we call the Reformation. Stow, as an apprentice, had seen it beginning to affect London. As a man of middle-age he witnessed the inflow of foreign protestant refugees. The dissolution of the monasteries gave London much needed space in which to house its increasing population, persecutions in Europe sent immigrants to hasten that growth and new skills to ensure its continuance. The sheer space which became available is only apparent when statistics are set down or examples given. In and around the city lay 23 important religious houses. Pleasant enclaves, with their cloisters, courtyards and gardens, they were, in the modern parlance, 'ripe for development' and by Stow's death nearly all had been thus developed. The friars, white, black, grey, crutched and Augustinian, remain as names in the topography of modern London, but Stow actually watched the change-over. Three examples may illustrate the process.

Charles V, Holy Roman Emperor and monarch of Spain, the Low Countries and the newly discovered American Indies, had lodged in the Blackfriars a few years before Stow was born. Before Stow's death, James Burbage, the Shakespearian actor-manager, had converted a part of the buildings into the Blackfriars theatre and the whole precinct had been developed and built over. Now *The Times* newspaper stands on one part of it, as proudly conscious as ever Burbage was of a part to be played and of critics to be convinced. The abbey of St. Mary Graces became first a depot for naval stores for the new Tudor fleets and, much later on, the Royal Mint we know today. We owe Winchester House and Winchester Street to the courtier, Sir William Paulet, and his son, the Marquis of Winchester, who acquired the Austin Friars from the Crown, first to live in and then to sell. Sooner or later, nearly all the monastic sites were built over, either with courts and alleys, crowded in order to house London's increasing thousands, or with buildings for commerce or the work of the port.

It was to a London thus evolving that the religious refugees came. In England the bulk of the population gradually accepted the change from the catholicism of Rome to the protestantism of the Elizabethan settlement and no revolt was either prolonged or widespread. But in many lands in Europe the older order had resisted strongly, and religious wars and persecutions sent thousands from France and from Flanders to seek new homes in England. Many came to the established or half-assimilated alien communities of London and the Home Counties. The city corporation and the magistrates of the adjacent areas, pressed by an anxious Privy Council, made returns of the names, trades and origins of all they could track, and French and Dutch protestant congregations struck deep roots in the very heart of the city.

Hence it was that the land-hunger, so familiar today, was every whit as pressing in the London of John Stow. Any historian of London's livery companies, greater or lesser,

can cite examples, with detail unknown to Stow, but which help to build up his picture, of cautious development of garden ground just outside the walls—between Fleet Street and Holborn, where the newspaper emperors now hold sway; in what is now Redcross Street; or by the road running south from London Bridge. The demand for great houses remained strong, though the owners might change. The demand for a roof of any kind ensured the building and sub-division so disliked by Stow and by all the authorities of his day, royal and civic alike.

For Stow was also to see, though not always to record, other aspects of this growth. Dearth and disease, war and poverty, were seldom absent from sixteenth-century Europe, and England, if relatively unharmed by war, had no immunity from the other three. London, corporation, livery companies and citizens alike, had constantly to plan against the possibility that harvests might fall short of needs increasing with the increasing population. Stow does not fail to notice men who, before his day, met the occasional famine by timely measures. He described Adam Bamme, the goldsmith, who as mayor in 1390–91 procured corn from beyond the seas, but he does not expatiate on the device regularly adopted from about the year of his own birth, by which the companies were compelled to lend money to the corporation in order to secure sufficient supplies. Unpopular, but effective, this was too normal, too recent, to gain more than an oblique reference from him. Of the poor, and the masterless men, twin nightmares of Elizabethan rulers, he also speaks little. Bridewell is mentioned, but not the great Elizabethan poor law which came into being in the years which saw the publication of the first and second editions of his *Survey*. And there is no mention of the mutinous assemblies of ex-soldiers and sailors, discharged servants and ex-retainers who, in 1589, threatened to sack the Royal Exchange and to pillage the booths at Bartholomew Fair. It was then and in the following year that the mayor had to call out a double watch, day and night, and 'the honest and discreet inhabitants . . . well and sufficiently weaponed' did duty night and day by rota. To face such troubles, William Fleetwood, the fiercely energetic Recorder of the city, led midnight searches to round up all who could give no good account of themselves. In 1590 one such midnight sweep collected a contingent for despatch at first light down river to serve in the campaign in the Low Countries. Others were dealt with by the justices, the country born being despatched to their own parishes and the Londoners sent for correction in Bridewell. All this found no place in Stow's *Survey*.

So, too, with public health. Stow chronicles action in London during the Black Death of 1349 but ignores the urgently-needed house for those infected in his own day. It came, built in the 1590's on three acres north of the city rented from St. Bartholomew's hospital, the buildings financed in part from a fine, in part from the proceeds of a captured Portuguese galleon, in part from a loan. The old man ignored its story, but that is no reproach to him. His self-appointed task was to look back into London's past, to search through evidence traditional and documentary, to perambulate, to see and to set down. And the picture he drew, the account he set down is as moving and as vivid today as when it first appeared new-minted and bright with the vigorous impress of his splendid enthusiasm. No tribute can be too great for him and I hope that the warmth in which his memory is still held is shown by this worshipful assembly today.