

JOHN STOW AND HIS MONUMENT

A. J. TAYLOR, C.B.E., M.A., D.LITT., F.B.A., DIR.S.A., F.R.HIST.S.

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I think I cannot do better, My Lord Mayor, than begin this address by recalling some of the words in which John Stow dedicated the second edition of his *Survey of London* to your Right Honourable predecessor Sir Robert Lee, Citizen and Merchant Taylor, in the year 1603.¹ "I have attempted", he writes, "the discovery of *London*, my native soyle and Countrey, at the desire and perswasion of some of my good friends, as well because I have seene sundry antiquities my selfe touching that place, as also for that, through search of Records to other purposes, diuers written helpes are come to my hands which few others have fortun'd to meet withall. . . . It is a duty that I willingly owe to my native mother and countrey . . . What London hath been of ancient time men may here see, as what it is now every man may beholde. I knowe that the argument, being of the chief and principall cittie of the land, required the pen of some excellent Artisen; but fearing that none would attempt, and finish it, . . . I chose rather (amongst other my Labours) to handle it after my playne manner, than to leave it unperformed."

Thus, modestly, almost apologetically, John Stow commended to his public a book which from the moment of its completion became a classic, that is to say a unique book, a book of rare quality, a book in a class by itself. Stow's long life, then drawing to its close, had already embraced 22 years of the reign of Henry VIII, the six years of Edward VI, the nine days of Lady Jane Grey, the six years of Mary Tudor, and the whole life² and 44 years' reign of Queen Elizabeth: a full three-quarters of the sixteenth century and the opening years of the seventeenth. That period in England witnessed the passing of the Middle Ages and, especially through the Dissolution of the monasteries and the colleges and the chantries, the violent destruction of great numbers of medieval buildings, which with their artistic and historic contents and particularly their monuments and their glass were often epitomes of English history going back to the Norman Conquest and sometimes further. These things were happening in London when Stow was an impressionable boy. The final dissolving of the greater abbeys and priories was ordered in 1539, that is to say exactly one year before, as a lad of 15, he started his apprenticeship to a Merchant Taylor named John Bulley. During the next ten years or so he must have seen with his own eyes many a historic building in course of demolition; we may instance his record of what happened to the priory of the Hospitallers at Clerkenwell. "This priory church and house of St. John", he writes, "was preserved from spoyle or down-pulling so long as king Henry eight raigned, and was employed as a store-house for the king's toyles and tents, for hunting and for the warres &c: but in the third year of king Edward the Sixt (*i.e.* 1550) the church for the most part, to wit the body and side aisles with the great Bell Tower, (a most curious peece of workmanshippe, grauen, gilt, and enamelled to the great beautifying of the Cittie, and passing all other that I haue scene) was undermined and blown up with Gunpowder, the stone thereof was employed in building of the Lord Protector's house at the Strand."³

While buildings like this were being destroyed, libraries and muniment rooms, chronicles and cartularies, were being dispersed, and might yet be recovered and turned to good account.

It was to the collection and preservation, copying and editing of these that Stow, having spent thirty years as a working tailor, devoted the second half of his long life, and very many of his transcripts and notes, in his neat, legible hand, are preserved to this day amongst the Harleian manuscripts in the British Museum. What architecture lost at the hands of the reformers, the historical study of antiquity gained at the hands of John Stow. His *Summary of English Chronicles*, a book of some 270 pages, first appeared in 1565; its 6th edition, enlarged to nearly 800 pages, in 1590. A different version, called the *Summary Abridged*, appeared in 1566, and was reprinted and revised nine times between then and 1618. In 1580 he brought out another book of *Chronicles*; and in 1592 appeared the first of six editions of his *Annales of England*, “faithfully collected out of the most authentick Authors, Records, and other monuments of Antiquitie, from the first inhabitation untill this present yere 1592. By John Stow.” It was not until six years later still, as a postscript as it were to these immense labours, that he produced in the year 1598, when he was 73 years old, his *Survey of London*, the book by which he is known everywhere and for which, as our Service here this morning shows, posterity still yields him undying affection.

Stow’s *Survey* has been so worthily and comprehensively treated in the fine critical edition of Charles Lethbridge Kingsford, that any subsequent worker who sets out to pay his tribute to Stow must needs acknowledge his deep debt to Kingsford also.⁴ Different readers of the *Survey* will have their own favourite passages. One of mine is Stow’s recollection of his boyhood chore of being sent to fetch the milk, and how unbelievably cheap it used to be, things that he is reminded of when he comes to write about the Minories, the dissolved abbey which had stood between Aldgate and Goodman’s Fields. “Neare adjoining to this Abbey”, he writes, “on the South side thereof, was sometime a Farm belonging to the said Nunnery, at the which Farme I my selfe in my youth have fetched many a halfe pennie-worth of Milke, and never had less than three Ale pints for a half-pennie in the Summer, nor lesse than one Ale quart for a half-pennie in the Winter, alwaies hote from the kine, as the same was milked and strained.”⁵ Stow’s looking back to the good old days of his youth when winter milk was only $\frac{1}{2}$ d. a quart, rather makes the occupant of this pulpit look back to the days when a City schoolboy could buy a cloth-bound gilt-lettered copy of the Everyman edition of Stow’s *Survey of London*⁶ for 2s. od. new, as the copy in my hand was bought at Stoneham’s bookshop by St. Stephen’s Walbrook, in 1924, 50 years ago this year. If it has not already gone up again, the same thing now costs £1.50, but it speaks wonders for Stow’s popularity that it is now available in paperback also. One may perhaps recall, too, that the very first book to be subscribed for by the newly-constituted Society of Antiquaries of London in 1719⁷ was Strype’s great 1720 folio edition of the *Survey*,⁸ and that the copy then bought is still in the Society’s library. What better link could there be between the Elizabethan antiquaries, amongst whom Stow himself was prominent, and the successor Society which still flourishes today?

Stow was totally at home with the past, whether the past of his own acute observation and long memory, or the past as explained and vouched for by the records which, self-taught, he explored and copied diligently at the Tower, or in search of which, having never learned to ride and being very far from well off, he travelled, on foot, to many parts of England.⁹ He also gleaned much material from the records of the City Companies, some of whom, being less responsive to his enquiries than others, stood very low in his estimation; what could be more withering than his dismissal of the Fishmongers as “men ignorant of their Antiquities, not able to show a reason why or when they were joined in amity with the

Goldsmiths”:¹⁰ He had it in for the Vintners too. Having taken a great deal of trouble to discover all he could of the Vintners’ history from the public records, he attended a Court of Assistants to read them his results and seek their help in supplementing these from the Company’s own archives. Yet all he got for his pains was a surprising assertion that they were one of the lesser, not one of the greater companies; not undeservedly he prints in the margin the acid comment: “The Vintoners one of the 12 principall companies. The readiest to speak, not alwaies the wisest of men.”¹¹

But Stow’s concern was not just with the past for its own sake. His condemnation of the Fishmongers and the Vintners was not directed simply at their unawareness of their own past, but at their lack of interest in the historical explanations he could offer them for their present status and importance. Stow’s real interest was with the living city of his own day, of which he was immensely proud. For him the explanation of the living present lay in *terms of continuity with a no less living past, and the buildings and the monuments, the institutions and the charities, even the very streets and rivers, were all invoked by him, and their stories traced and unravelled, to explain how his city had come to be the wonderful place in which he and his contemporaries moved and had their being.* When he recorded, often more by silent implication than open accusation, the facts of the iconoclastic holocaust which the Reformation had inflicted, in his own lifetime, in its destruction of the contents of most of the great London conventual churches, he was doing so not as a mere antiquary, but as one relating the past to the present, and lamenting silently the awful damage that had been done to the City’s greatness as the shrine and living successor of so much tangible evidence for the continuity of English history. That, I think, is how we have to see such a passage as the list Stow has left to us, without comment, of the 50 tombs and monuments destroyed in the church of the Blackfriars, including as they did those of Queen Margaret of Scotland and the heart burials of Eleanor of Castille and the little prince Alfonso, and many another famous personage.¹² For Greyfriars the list is more than twice as long and even more distinguished: “All these and five times so many more have bin buried there”, he says, “whose monuments are wholly defaced.”¹³ What Stow is saying is that in these great churches the City had had, right down to his own boyhood, what in modern terminology might be described as Westminster Abbeys in miniature, and that the Elizabethan city was immeasurably the poorer for their loss.

At a time when much money and effort are being devoted to seeing that the part of London’s past that lies buried beneath its soil is not destroyed without examination and record, John Stow’s own competence and interest in such matters deserves not to pass unnoticed. I wish there were time to quote *in extenso* from the remarkable account he has left us of the results of a self-appointed watching brief he carried out in the interests of rescue-archaeology in the 1570’s, on a Roman cemetery site that must have lain only a few hundred yards from where, in the 1970’s, the London and Middlesex Archaeological Society holds its meetings in the Bishopsgate Institute. It is to be found in the *Survey in the section on Bishopsgate Ward*, and I would commend it as illuminating reading for any who may imagine that urban archaeology is an invention of the twentieth century.¹⁴

Finally, let us think for a moment of John Stow and this church of St. Andrew Under-shaft; what he knew of it, what he tells us about it, and what there is to be said of the monument at which in a few minutes we shall symbolise for another year Stow’s legacy to London and London’s debt to Stow. First its name. Stow, good scholar that he was, was always interested in city place-names. This “faire and beautifull parish Church of *S. Andrew*

the Apostle”, he tells us, has the “addition, to be knowne from other churches of that name, of the *Knape* or *Undershaft*” (*Knape*, K-N-A-P-E, from Old English “knap” or “cnaep”, meaning the top of a hill, a reminder that it was also commonly called *St. Andrew-upon-Cornhill*;) ¹⁵ and “*Undershaft*, because that of old time, every year on *May day* in the morning, it was used that an high or long shaft or *May-pole* was set up there, in the midst of the streete, before the South doore of the said Church, which shaft when it was sett on ende, and fixed in the grounde, was higher than the Church steeple” (—the tower was then one storey lower than it is today). Though it had not been used since 1517, Stow well remembered seeing the old pole resting on its hooks along the fronts of a row of houses in a passage called *Shaft Alley*. There it remained until about 1550 when, to Stow’s huge contempt, the puritannical parson of *St. Katharine Cree* claimed that it was an *Idol*, and so got it sawn up and burnt. ¹⁶

As to the fabric of the church, Stow is himself our authority for its having been rebuilt by the parishioners, structurally very much as we still see it this morning, between the years 1520 and 1532, “every man putting his helping hand”, he records, “some with their purses, other with their bodies: *Steven Gennings*, *Marchant Taylor*, sometime Mayor of London, caused att his charges to bee builded the whole North side of the great *Middle Ile*, both of the body and quier, . . . and also the North Ile, which hee roofed with timber and seeled, also the whole South side of the Church was glazed . . . (at) his costes, as appeareth in every Window, . . . which worke was finished to the glasing in 1529, and fully finished 1532.” ¹⁷ The heraldic glass Stow referred to, containing several shields of the old-style arms of the *Merchant Taylors*, formed the finest surviving collection of pre-Reformation glass in the City, and still filled the aisle windows until it was wisely removed (apart from a few still-remaining fragments) for safety during the last war. ¹⁸ We must hope that its replacement will be possible in the not too distant future, for nothing could now do more to bring back the likeness of this beautiful building to the church that Stow would himself have known.

It was this church which became Stow’s own church for the last 35 years of his life, after he moved to his house near *Leadenhall* in about the year 1570. Here, in 1581, his daughter *Julian* was married to *Peter Towers* (who was to become Master of the Company in 1622), and here, in the 1580’s and ’90’s, their eight children, Stow’s grandchildren, were baptised. ¹⁹ Two of the boys, *Thomas* and *Gregory Towers*, went to the school in *Suffolk Lane*. ²⁰ Tom, the elder, was born in the early summer of 1588, just about the time the *Spanish Armada* was setting sail for England. ²¹ He would thus have been a boy of 14 in 1602, when it fell to Stow’s patron, *Sir Robert Lee*, to stage the annual triumph which was to be the last Lord Mayor’s Show of *Queen Elizabeth’s* reign. It must have been well up to standard, for the Company paid the Headmaster of the school the sum of £7 13s. 4d. for the costs of “preparing A Wagon and appareling ten schollers, which did represent the nyne muses and the god *Apollo* before my Lord Mayor in *Cheapside*.” ²² In the afterlight, one cannot but be tempted to wonder whether the part of the muse of History might not even have been played by old Stow’s grandson, and Stow himself a much contented spectator. Alas, within a twelve-month, young Tom, only 15, was to be buried here at *St. Andrew’s*, ²³ probably a victim of the bad plague outbreak of the summer of 1603. ²⁴

Here, too, having reached the age of 80, Stow himself was buried on 8th April, 1605. ²⁵ Let our last thought, then, be of the monument which *Elizabeth Stow* caused to be put up to her husband’s memory. ²⁶ It shows him in effigy with three of his own books; ²⁷ one, which he is still writing, lies open on a table in front of him, the others rest on either side

of the little alcove in which he is at work; one may suppose that the open volume may indeed not be the *Survey of London*, but rather the *Annals of England*, the revision of which he actually brought down to only ten days before his death.²⁸ Panels to left and right bear the emblems of his craft as an antiquary: two books, one open, one closed; two pairs of crossed spades and leg-bones, to witness to his practical interest in archæological excavation; and, at the foot, a flaming brazier, symbolising the fire of life at which he had warmed his hands to such good purpose. Stow was not armigerous; instead his monument appropriately bears the arms of the Company whose freeman he was, amongst whose brethren he had many good friends and who, as a fitting tercentenary tribute to his greatness, were to undertake its restoration in the year 1905.²⁹ Its epitaph, long wrongly lettered but now corrected, is based on a well-chosen phrase of Pliny:³⁰ AVT SCRIBENDA AGERE, AVT LEGENDA SCRIBERE. "Blessed is the man to whom it is given", wrote Pliny, "either to do things that are worth writing about, or to write things that are worth reading about". Herein John Stow was doubly blest, for surely he did both, and did them both abundantly, and that is why his London still remembers him.

How continuously, or it may be how intermittently, there has taken place since 1605 this little ceremony of the annual renewal of the master's quill I have not discovered. But it has a respectable antiquity, for as long ago as 1828 it is mentioned as something that was then being done regularly.³¹ As we re-enact it today, let us be especially mindful of the antiquities of London-within-the-Walls, and let us, all of us, make it our purpose to preserve and cherish them wherever and whenever it is practicable and beneficial to do so. So "may wee and our posterity", in Stow's own words, "long enjoy the good estate of this Cittie."³²

NOTES

- ¹ *A Survey of London*, by John Stow . . . 1603, pp. iii-vi. The 1598 edition contained an identical dedication, but it was addressed to the Lord Mayor *ex officio* and without name. The inclusion of Sir Robert Lee's name at the head of the 1603 "Epistle Dedicatory" may well reflect personal acquaintanceship through the Merchant Taylors' Company.
- ² Stow was born in 1525, Queen Elizabeth in 1533.
- ³ *Survey of London*, ii, 84-85. This and future references, abbreviated to *SL*, are to C. L. Kingsford's edition of 1908.
- ⁴ C. L. Kingsford, ed., *Stow's Survey of London*, 2 vols., Oxford, 1908. For Kingsford's life, see A. G. Little, "Charles Lethbridge Kingsford, 1862-1926", *Proceedings of the British Academy*, xii, 348-356.
- ⁵ *SL*, i, 126; ii, 288.
- ⁶ *The Survey of London*, by John Stow, Citizen of London, ed. H. B. Wheatley, London, J. M. Dent & Sons, 1912.
- ⁷ Joan Evans, *A History of the Society of Antiquaries* (Oxford, 1956), p. 65 and note.
- ⁸ *A Survey of the Cities of London and Westminster*, By John Stow . . . Now Lastly Corrected, Improved and very much Enlarged By John Strype . . . In Six Books, London, 1720.
- ⁹ *SL*, i, p. xxiv.
- ¹⁰ *SL*, i, 215.
- ¹¹ *SL*, ii, 247-48.
- ¹² *SL*, i, 340-41.
- ¹³ *SL*, i, 319-22.
- ¹⁴ *SL*, i, 168-70.
- ¹⁵ *SL*, i, 143; ii, 292.
- ¹⁶ *SL*, i, 143-44.
- ¹⁷ *SL*, i, 145.
- ¹⁸ For a summary description of the St. Andrew's glass, see *An Inventory of the Historical Monuments in London, Vol. IV, The City* (HMSO, 1929), pp. 6 and 7; for illustrations of the arms of Jennings, Goldwell and the Merchant Taylors' Company, see *ibid.*, Pl. 15.
- ¹⁹ *SL*, i, p. xlvi.
- ²⁰ Mrs. E. P. Hart, ed., *Merchant Taylors' School Register 1561-1934* (2 vols., London, 1936), ii, s.n. TOWERS. It may well be that one or more of the other brothers, Peter (bapt. 1582), Francis (bapt. 1583), Peter (bapt. 1594) and Robert (bapt. 1596), were also at the school, but the records are very imperfect before 1607 (cf. *ibid.*, i, pp. iii and iv).
- ²¹ Thomas was baptised on 2 June 1588 (*SL*, i, p. xlvi); the Armada left the Tagus in the last days of May 1588 (J. B. Black, *The Reign of Elizabeth, 1558-1603* (Oxford, 1936), p. 343).
- ²² F. W. M. Draper, *Four Centuries of Merchant Taylors' School, 1561-1961* (London, O.U.P., 1962), p. 40.
- ²³ *SL*, i, p. xlvi.
- ²⁴ For how the effects of the plague of that year were felt at the school, see Draper, *loc. cit.*
- ²⁵ *SL*, i, p. xlvi.



The John Stow Monument
St. Andrew Undershaft Church, St. Mary Axe, E.C.3 (*National Monuments Record*)

- ²⁶ It is said to be the work of the Southwark monumental mason Nicholas Johnson (or Jansen), who collaborated with the more famous sculptor Nicholas Stone in the fashioning of Sir Thomas Sutton's monument at the Charterhouse (W. L. Spiers, *The Note-book and Account Book of Nicholas Stone* (Walpole Society, vol. vii, Oxford, 1919), pp. 40-41; there is a marked resemblance between the detailing of the flanking pilasters of the Stow monument and the corresponding features of the Sutton monument, Johnson's itemised estimate for which is printed in Gerald S. Davies, *Charterhouse in London* (1921), 347-8.
- ²⁷ In this respect it anticipates Stone's monument to Sir Thomas Bodley at Merton College, Oxford, which is carved to represent the stacks of books whose amassing and presentation to the university was Bodley's crowning achievement.
- ²⁸ *SL*, i, p. lxxxiv.
- ²⁹ F. M. Fry, *The Pictures of the Merchant Taylors' Company* (London, 1907), Appendix B, pp. 149-53.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 152.
- ³¹ "The pen in his hand is annually renewed". Thomas Allen, *History and Antiquities of London* (1828). I owe this reference to the kindness of Mr. F. J. Froom.
- ³² *SL*, ii, 195.