

# JOHN STOW

AN ADDRESS DELIVERED IN ST. ANDREW'S UNDERSHAFT AT THE ANNUAL  
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John Stow, chronicler and antiquary, was born about 1525 in the parish of St. Michael, Cornhill. From about 1570 he lived in a house near Leadenhall and worshipped regularly in this church to which his mortal remains were committed for safe keeping on 8th April, 1605, 372 years ago. His life extended over five reigns from Henry VII to James I, one of the most momentous periods of our history.

Stow in early life was a tailor and until his death an honoured member of the Merchant Taylors' Company but from 1560 onwards his time was mainly spent in the collection of printed books, legal and literary documents, and charters, and in the transcription of MSS dealing with English history, archaeology and literature. His researches certainly established his reputation amongst the notable scholars of his age. He was a friend of Archbishop Parker and the leading antiquaries of the day — William Lambarde, Henry Saville, Camden, John Dee the astrologer, and Robert Glover, the Somerset Herald, and when the old Society of Antiquaries was founded c.1572 under the patronage of Parker it was natural that Stow should become a member. Stow made great use of City and other records and it is to Stow and others like him that we owe the preservation of so many records from the monasteries which were suppressed when he was young. His private collection of MSS was a considerable one and included not only the registers of many important London monasteries such as Holy Trinity, Aldgate, the Nuns' Priory and Hospital of St. John at Clerkenwell, and St. Augustine Papey, but also the Liber S. Bartholomei, a history of St. Bartholomew's Priory, and the works of many of the great medieval historians like William of Malmesbury, Henry of Huntingdon, and Roger Hovenden.

His publications, which all had the long titles so customary in his day, included his 'Summarie of Englyshe Chronicles conteyning the true accompt of yeres wherein every Kyng of this Realme . . . began theyr reigne, howe long they reigned, and what notable thynges hath bene doone, duryng theyr Reygnes. Wyth also the names and yeares of all the Bylyffes, custos, maiors, and sheriffes of the Citie of London sens the Conqueste, dyligently collected by J. Stow' which was published in 1565, and The Chronicles of England in 1580, which re-appeared a few years later as The Annals of England. In addition to these, which were the results of his own historical studies, he saw through the press editions of Matthew of Westminster's 'Flores Historiarum'; Matthew Paris's 'Chronica Majora'; Thomas Walsingham's 'Historia Anglicana'; Holinshed's 'Chronicle' and 'The Workes of Geffrey Chaucer, newly printed, with divers addicions whiche were never in printe before'. The best known result of his own researches was, however, the famous 'Survey of London conteyning the Originall, Antiquity, Increase, Moderne estate, and description of that City, written in the year 1598 by John Stow Citizen of London.'

What Stow saw he recorded with painstaking thoroughness and fidelity. He was immensely proud of his City, of the characters and achievements of its citizens, of its history, its traditions and its institutions. We are left in no doubt, for example, as to his love for London's river. Stow calls the Thames 'the most famous river of this island . . . by which all kind of merchandise be easily conveyed to London, the principal store-house and staple of all commodities within this realm',<sup>1</sup> and in the section which he entitles 'The enumeration of such benefits as redound to the Prince and this Realme by this City' he includes 'By the benefit of the river of Thames, and great trade of merchandise, it is the chief maker of mariners, and nurse of our navy; and ships (as men know) be the wooden walls for defence of our realm.'<sup>2</sup>

Stow describes the churches of London, great and small, with tremendous affection. He writes: 'There were in this city, and within the suburbs thereof, in the reign of Henry II, thirteen great conventual churches, besides the lesser sort called parish churches, to the number of one hundred and twenty-six, all which conventual churches, and some others since that time founded, are now suppressed and gone, except the cathedral church of St. Paul in London, and the college of St. Peter at Westminster.'<sup>3</sup> What loving care he devotes to his description of old St. Paul's, the foundation, the building, the chapels, the Chapter House, the charnel house, the cloisters, and, above all, his painstaking listing of the numerous monuments in this and other churches, many of them now, alas, lost for ever.

In St. Paul's Stow mentions about one hundred monuments by name with the qualification 'these, as the chief, have I noted to be buried there'. They include numerous kings, bishops, and mayors, and such great Elizabethans as Sir Philip Sidney, Sir Francis Walsingham, principal secretary and chancellor of the duchy of Lancaster, and Sir Christopher Hatton, lord chancellor of England, knight of the Garter, the latter buried under a monument of such size and magnificence that it prompted the verse:

'Philip and Francis have no tombe,  
For great Christopher takes all the roome.'<sup>4</sup>

In the same way he enthuses over 'the famous monastery of Westminster', giving details of its foundation, its rebuilding under Edward the Confessor, and the addition of Henry VII's 'sumptuous chapel' with its altar and sepulture made and finished in 1519 by one Peter a painter of Florence.<sup>5</sup> He lists those whose tombs he saw there, kings, queens, bishops and other notables. Indeed, every church in London, great and small, was visited and all noteworthy monuments carefully described. His pride in them all is clearly shown by the enthusiasm of his descriptions.

Stow shows equal enthusiasm for the schools and places of learning connected with London. He regrets that 'as to me it seemeth, by the increase of colleges and students in the universities of Oxford and Cambridge, the frequenting of schools, and exercises of scholars in the city . . . hath much decreased.'<sup>6</sup> He tells us that 'The three principal churches which had these famous schools . . . must needs be the cathedral church of St. Paul for one . . . The second, as most ancient, may seem to have been the monastery of St. Peter's at Westminster, whereof Ingulphus, Abbot of Crowland, in the reign of William the Conqueror, writeth thus: "I, Ingulphus, an humble servant of God, born of English parents, in the most beautiful city of London, for to attain to learning, was first put to Westminster, and after to study at Oxford" . . . The third school seemeth to have been in the monastery of St. Saviour at Bermondsey in Southwark.'<sup>7</sup>

Concerning 'schools more lately advanced in this city' he goes on to tell us that St. Paul's School was refounded and 'largely endowed, in the year 1512, by John Colet, Doctor of Divinity, Dean of Paul's, for one hundred and fifty-three poor men's children'<sup>8</sup> and that 'in the year 1553, after the erection of Christ's hospital, in the late dissolved house of the Gray Friars, a great number of poor children being taken in, a school was also ordained there at the citizen's charges.'<sup>9</sup> He tells us also that 'in the year 1561, the Merchant Taylors of London founded a notable free grammer school, in the parish of St. Laurence Poultney by Candleweeke Street.'<sup>10</sup>

Still on education he goes on to regret that 'the meeting of the schoolmasters on festival days, at festival churches, and the disputing of their scholars logically . . . was long since discontinued; but the arguing of the schoolboys about the principles of grammar hath been continued even till our time; for I myself, in my youth, have yearly seen, on the eve of St. Bartholomew the Apostle, the scholars of divers grammar schools repair unto the churchyard of St. Bartholomew, the priory in Smithfield . . . amongst others, the masters and scholars of the free schools of St. Paul's in London, of St. Peter's at Westminster, of St. Thomas Acon's hospital, and of St. Anthonie's hospital; whereof the last named commonly presented the best scholars, and had the prize in those days.'<sup>11</sup>

Schools were also founded in connection with chantries, hospitals and other religious foundations. Stow tells us that 'The honourable and famous merchant, Simon Eyre . . . once mayor of this city, citizen and draper . . . (who) departed out of this life, the 18th day of September . . . 1549, and . . . was buried in the parish church of St. Mary Woolnoth, in Lombard Street . . . gave by his testament . . . three thousand marks to the drapers on condition they should, within one year of his decease, establish perpetually a master or warden, five secular priests, six clerks, and two choristers, to sing daily Divine service . . . in his chapel of the Leaden hall; also, one master with an usher, for grammar, one master for writing, and the third for song, with housing there newly built for them for ever . . .'<sup>12</sup> St. Anthony's hospital, mentioned earlier for the standard of its debating, was, according to Stow 'founded in the parish of St. Bennet Finke, for a master, two priests, one schoolmaster, and twelve poor men . . . (and) amongst other things was given to this hospital, one messuage and garden, whereon was built the fair large free school . . .'<sup>13</sup> Later Henry VI gave to the Master of St. Anthony's hospital . . . property and pensions . . . towards the maintenance of five scholars in the University of Oxford, to be brought up in the faculty of arts . . . the sayd scholars (to) be first instructed in the rudiments of grammar at the college of Eton, founded by the said Henry.'<sup>14</sup>

Stow also gives many examples of schools founded in other parts of the country by citizens and mayors of London, but we shall have to be content with the mention of a few. For example 'William Sevenoke, grocer, founded in the town of Sevenoke, in Kent, a free school for poor men's children'<sup>15</sup> 'Sir John Percivall, merchant taylor, mayor, 1498, founded a grammar school at Macklefield in Cheshire, where he was born' . . . 'The Lady Thomasine, his wife founded the like free school, together with fair lodgings for the schoolmasters, scholars and other, and added twenty pounds of yearly revenue for supporting the charges, at St. Mary Wike in Cornwall, where she was born,'<sup>16</sup> and 'Stephen Gennings, Merchant Taylor, Mayor, 1509, founded a fair grammar school at Ulfrimhampton in Staffordshire . . . and also built a great part of his parish church, called St. Andrew's Undershaft in London.'<sup>17</sup> In the realm of higher education Stow tells us that 'Sir Thomas White, Merchant Taylor,

mayor, 1554, founded St. John's College, Oxford'<sup>18</sup> and that Sir Thomas Gresham, mercer, 1566, amongst his many benefactions, made provision for lectures in a variety of subjects.<sup>19</sup> Of the houses of students in the Common Law he writes: 'there is in and about this city, a whole university, as it were, of students, practicers or pleaders, and judges of the laws of this realm . . . fourteen houses (or Inns) in all'.<sup>20</sup> Stow was proud of the schools of London and of the contribution of Londoners to the development of education in sixteenth century England.

In addition to describing the river, the churches and schools already mentioned Stow takes us on a perambulation of the city ward by ward, street by street, even into courts and alleys, describing city walls, gates, castles, towers, hospitals and lazar houses, telling of the orders and customs of the citizens as well as their sports and pastimes, even giving a description of the livery of the mayor and sheriffs and the order of precedence of the Companies of London at the Lord Mayor's feast. Although the book contains many errors it is because of Stow's observations and descriptions that we are able to visualise medieval London as it appeared before the destruction of the Great Fire — sixty-eight years after the publication of the Survey.

It is evident that his researches cost him a great deal of effort and money. Of his Summary in 1598 he writes: 'It hath cost me many a weary mile's travel, many a hard-earned penny and pound, and many a cold winter night's study.' The same must have applied to all his work, but there is little evidence that Stow made much out of his writings. We know that the Merchant Taylors' allowed him a pension of £4 a year as early as 1579, and that this was increased later to around £10. The Merchant Taylors' also paid him a fee of ten shillings in 1603 for 'great pains by him taken in searching for such as have been mayors, sheriffs, and aldermen of the said company'. In 1595 Stow is referred to as the 'fee'd Chronicler' of the Corporation, but his pecuniary difficulties grew with the years, and were at length brought to the notice of the government. On 8th March 1603-4 letters patent were issued authorising Stow to 'collect voluntary contributions and kind gratuities' but although Stow set up receptacles for alms in the streets, the citizens were not over-generous with their contributions. Three months before his death it is recorded 'that there was gathered, in the church of St. Margaret, Lothbury, by the King's letters patent for John Stow, cronaklemacker, the sum of 5s.3d.' So much for a lifetime of labour.

However, just as he loved to praise famous men and rejoiced in their good deeds, so we have no hesitation today in praising him for his unique contribution to our knowledge of the history of this famous city.

#### NOTES

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| 1. John Stow. <i>The Survey of London</i> , ed. H. B. Wheatley, Everyman 1970, p.13. | 11. <i>ibid.</i>               |
| 2. <i>ibid.</i> p.496  | 12. <i>ibid.</i> p.139         |
| 3. <i>ibid.</i> p.433  | 13. <i>ibid.</i> p.165.        |
| 4. <i>ibid.</i> p.302.   | 14. <i>ibid.</i>               |
| 5. <i>ibid.</i> p.407.   | 15. <i>ibid.</i> p.99          |
| 6. <i>ibid.</i> p.66.  | 16. <i>ibid.</i> p.101-2.      |
| 7. <i>ibid.</i> pp.66-7.   | 17. <i>ibid.</i> p.102.        |
| 8. <i>ibid.</i> p.68.  | 18. <i>ibid.</i> p.103.        |
| 9. <i>ibid.</i>  | 19. <i>ibid.</i> p.70 & p.104. |
| 10. <i>ibid.</i>   | 20. <i>ibid.</i> p.70.         |