

JOHN STOW

COMMEMORATION ADDRESS BY PHILIPPA GLANVILLE
delivered at St. Andrew Undershaft, 23rd April 1980

We are gathered here to honour a man who served this City of London well. He recorded in his many books its historical evolution and described those changes which most affected it during his long life, a life which spanned the reigns of Henry VIII and all his children, and only ended after James I came to the throne. His *Survey*, published in the last decade of the 16th century, reflects the Tudor explosion of London's population and its impact on the City. Historians still argue about the size of that increase but agree that it was phenomenal; Stow depicts for us the effect on ordinary people of the process of change, the process by which a city of 50,000 people became in less than a century home to nearly quarter of a million. The in-filling was so intensive that squatters even threw up shacks on the public rubbish dumps or lay-stalls of the City. The May Games were abandoned for bowls and tennis, the fields and gardens of Stow's childhood disappeared, great houses were split up into tenements, warehouses and factories. But there were more positive aspects to this blooming City; these too, its vitality, wealth and pride, Stow describes and not always in that tone of regret and nostalgia which is so often associated with him today.

My distinguished predecessors in this place have paid tribute to many aspects of Stow's life and worthiness of remembrance—his unique contribution to London topography, his records of church monuments long vanished, his lists of charities and benefactions, his civic pride. I should like to consider one aspect of that pride in London which was so widely felt by its citizens. Stow preserved for us the memory of the great men of his time, merchants and aldermen, members of the City aristocracy such as Sir Andrew Judd, the Greshams, father and son, Richard Hills, whose names survived through their schools, alms-houses and public buildings; the generosity has been fully studied by Professor Jordan.¹ One of these men and not the least generous was Sir John Allen, mercer and twice Lord Mayor. Sir John had the special distinction of serving as one of Henry VIII's counsellors. From his time at Court he came to appreciate the status conferred by the massive gold livery collars worn by the great Tudor officers of State; one such can be seen on Sir Thomas More in the marvellous Holbein of the More family at home in Chelsea. Sir John may well himself have received such a collar from the King's hands. Of this we cannot be sure but the magnificent gold collar of SS, Tudor roses and knots which is one of the greatest treasures of the City and still worn by the Lord Mayor is that same 'rich collar of gold' which, Stow records, Sir John left to the City on his death in 1545.²

Allen's unique gift to the Mayor and his successors is a splendid example of

the Tudor goldsmith's craft and exemplifies that swelling pride in the City and the mayoralty, its chief embodiment, which was a constant theme of Stow's work. The very prefix 'Lord' only became permanently attached to the title of the Mayor of London, to differentiate him from all others, some 20 years before Stow's birth. Turning to some rather more everyday objects surviving from the Tudor city, Stow has something helpful to say here also. He refers (by implication) several times to the great technological leap forward which took place in England during the 16th century; of this London was inevitably the chief beneficiary. Stow's comments on contemporary industries shed light on the great range of metalwork, pottery and glass recovered from the soil and the river in the past century and a half.

The unsophisticated 'coarse and uncomely' wares made in the early Tudor city were constantly being supplemented by luxuries expensively imported from Germany, Italy and the Low Countries, to the horror of contemporary economists. A negative balance of trade is no new phenomenon; Londoners have always hungered after foreign novelties—'glasses as well looking as drinking as to glass windows, dials, puppets, pen-horns, toothpicks, knives, earthen-pots, hawks-bells and a thousand like things that might be cleaned spared or else made within this realm'—a familiar story indeed.

However by the time of Stow's death all this had changed; the foreigners, scenting a rich and growing home-market, had come to teach us their new techniques. Glasses, watches, fine knives, delftware were all made in London by 1600, either by immigrant Flemings or by such enterprising Englishmen as Richard Dyer. He, Stow recalls, had learnt from his travels in Spain the knack of making small pottery hand-stoves. Londoners had been familiar for over a century with pottery braziers and chafing-dishes, but Dyer's pots, fired at a kiln outside Moorgate, were of a neat new shape, handsomely green-glazed and very handy for slipping under the table, or even under one's robes to warm the feet in particularly cold weather. This project quite met with Stow's approval.³

Stow has also preserved for us what little is known of London's first delftware potters, Flemings from Antwerp who settled in Aldgate, already an industrial quarter, in 1570. These makers of decorative painted earthenwares, jars for apothecaries, tiles and display plates, have left art historians with a continuing puzzle; we cannot distinguish exactly what they made from the later Southwark and Lambeth delftware. However, thanks to Stow, the probable site of their kiln is known to within a hundred yards or so and the current programme of the Museum of London Department of Urban Archaeology has been excavating important pottery evidence from the area. Stow must have known Jacob Johnson or Janson, the leader of these Flemish potters, who moved into the Sign of the Rose by Aldgate pump, only a stone's throw away from the house which had been the historian's home of twenty years. Stow notes the claim that Johnson or Janson's father, also a delft potter, had been invited to London by Henry VIII; this was no doubt part of the great exercise by that would-be renaissance prince to drag English craftsmanship up to the standards of his European princely rivals, especially Francis I.⁴ Johnson senior refused to come to this barbaric off-shore island and the Italian glass-makers

wooded by Henry returned home after their contract expired but the making of fine Venetian crystal glass was, like delft pottery, to become another of London's new skills by the time of Stow's death. In the 1570s a glass house was set up by Jacob Verzelini in the premises of the dissolved Crutched Friars off Hart Street. Here Verzelini, an Italian by origin but with experience of glass-making in the Low Countries, blew and engraved glasses for wedding gifts and ordinary wine glasses with lion-mask stems. Some found on the site are now in the Museum of London. Even after Stow's move westwards to the house near the Three Tuns in Devonhall Street he still only lived around the corner from Crutched Friars. He records a massive fire at the kiln in September 1575 (always a bad month for fires in a timber-framed city). Fortunately the thick stone walls of the friary hall contained the fire and little external damage was done. The glass house re-opened soon afterwards and flourished until the death of its founder. Without Stow's description of it and of the glassmaker, the earliest known fine English-made glass would have remained anonymous.⁵

Another example of Stow's interest in the new skills of his fellow townsmen is his account of Richard Matthews, a cutler living near Fleet Bridge. Matthews, Stow claims, was the first Englishman 'that attained to the skill of making fine knives and knife hafts . . . with a new kind of hafts'. Matthews' knives, for we think we can identify some amongst the many in the Museum of London that come from London sites, are indeed stronger with a blade and haft cast all in one piece; they made the early Tudor knives imported from Flanders look positively flimsy.⁶ Again Stow's passing mention gives the modern curator a peg or date around which to hang a typology of knives, a dating sequence of use for other towns. I have referred to some occasions when Stow's notes from his personal knowledge of the times can help museum curators in their attempts to date and understand everyday items from the Tudor city. What, if anything, does Stow have to tell the archaeologists now studiously working on pre-fire London?⁷

John Stow was well aware of the need to walk about and observe as well as to read interminably the dusty parchments and papers stored at Guildhall, the Tower, in church vestries and company halls. Repeatedly he describes archaeological discoveries, often made as an incidental result of that site-clearance and rebuilding characteristic of the Elizabethan city. The sites he observed were usually, though not exclusively Roman, such as the cemetery east of the church-wall at Spitalfields. This was exposed in 1576 when a new brickfield was being worked there, supplying clay to nearby brick kilns. Stow went on site, examined the contents of several glass phials from the burials, collected one of the urns with its ashes and bones and kept also a little pot in the form of a hare. So vivid is his description of the finds that we can identify samian ware, the dishes and cups 'which showed such a shining smoothness as if they had been of coral'. He even noted the makers' stamps on their bases. An early post-Roman burial he examined also at Spitalfields, an area then under considerable pressure from would-be developers, survived only in part. The existence of the wooden coffin (which had utterly decayed) had to be inferred from the remains of the nails which had held it together; along with the

jawbone of the occupant Stow carried away one of these massive coffin nails and recorded that there were still to be seen under the head 'slight traces of the old wood, scant turned into earth but still the grain and proper colour'. A perfect illustration of the archaeological method! He even gives the orientation of the burial.⁷

His awareness of London's Roman origins was of course part and parcel of the antiquarian knowledge of the time. In their detailed interpretations antiquarians of course differed. The record of the deposit of more than a hundred ox-skulls discovered in the early 14th century under the new work at St. Paul's Cathedral was interpreted by Stow as demonstrating the existence of a temple to Jupiter there. His friend William Camden, the better scholar but heavily dependant on Stow for his London material and transcripts of manuscripts, nevertheless insisted on calling it a temple to Diana, a story which is still current today. Camden is the better-known national but Stow the better London historian.

Stow's textual criticism was exemplary; he insisted on rejecting the later versions of early British history as recounted by Geoffrey of Monmouth, the commonly-received medieval source. He went back to Caesar's Commentaries on his campaign in Gaul and Britain and argued effectively that Caesar used the word 'civitas' to mean not a city but a tribe or nation under one head, thus squashing the myths of the pre-Roman origins of London. In this area Stow must have benefited from the special knowledge of his friends in the Elizabethan Society of Antiquaries. For a self-taught man, his confidence in reading and translating Latin and Norman French was admirable. Stow's personal experience of the capital extending back over 70 years at the time of the first edition of his *Survey* shines out in every page of the book and indeed also in his *Annales of England*. This latter work was part of a projected history of England which he regarded as a more serious work than his topographical studies. In this year by year chronology of English history from its mythical beginnings to 'this present year 1592', the great set-piece events of national life, royal deaths, campaigns abroad, trial of heretics are interspersed with such idiosyncratic incidents as that of the two Dutch freaks, one a giant and the other a dwarf, whom Stow, along with many other Londoners, marvelled at in 1581. He describes how the dwarf could walk through the giant's legs. He saw them at a tavern which no doubt made a great deal of money from this unusual attraction.⁸

Stow's omnivorous curiosity assumed an equal interest for his gentle reader in a description of Philip Sydney's campaign in the Low Countries and in an accident at a gunpowder store in Fetter Lane at eight o'clock one morning in 1583 which killed three people. Stow constantly reiterated in his prefaces his determination to bring 'Hidden Histories from Dusky Darkness to the sight of the World', a wish expressed almost in the same words by his distinguished predecessor John Leland whose collected manuscripts survived in Stow's careful transcripts now in the Bodleian Library. Stow's own assiduous collecting and transcribing of medieval manuscripts over forty years or more is well known and an additional reason for us to honour him. Many were

preserved after his death through the energetic interest of Simon D'Ewes and Robert Cotton and are now in the British Library. Others have vanished, some no doubt cleared away as so much waste paper; Mr. Edwards the broker and fripperer had a quantity in hand in 1613.⁹ But enough survived in print and in manuscript to give us reason to rejoice in the life of this man whose aim, as expressed in one of his dedications to a worthy predecessor of the Lord Mayor, was 'to preserve for posterity the fleeting manners of the people and the accidents of the time'.

NOTES

1. W. K. Jordan *The Charities of London 1480-1660* (London) 1960.
2. While these collars had been used for 200 years or more they appeared to have been widely recognised as an attribute to which the City's chief officer could aspire only in the 16th century. There is a massive literature on the significance of the SS, see for example A. P. Cust *The Collar of SS* (London) 1910. On the London collar see Jewitt and Hope *Corporation plate . . . of the British Isles* Vol. 2, 111-116; and *Princely Magnificence: Court Jewels of the Renaissance* (Victoria and Albert Museum 1980) 52-53.
3. See for example a handstove in the Museum of London, Acc. No. A4545 illustrated in the Museum's publication *Tudor London* (1980).
4. I. Noël Hume *Early delftware from London and Virginia* (Williamsburg 1977).
5. Verzelini is most conveniently discussed in E. S. Godfrey *The development of English glassmaking 1560-1640* (Oxford 1975) 28-33.
6. Matthews is remembered in the City for other reasons. He presented to the Lord Mayor a very fine sword and to his own company, The Cutlers, made various other generous gifts. By using a combination of Stow's references and those in the Company's own records it is possible to reconstruct something of Matthews's career.
7. John Stow *Survey of London* Vol. I (ed. Kingston 1908) 168-170.
8. John Stow *Annales of England faithfully collected . . . from the first until this present year 1592 (1593)* 1181.
9. *Survey* Introduction p. lxxxvii.