

JOHN STOW

COMMEMORATION ADDRESS BY MARC FITCH

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A very natural tradition has grown up whereby those who give this oration tend to divide their subject into two: John Stow, the man and his work. As regards the man himself it is unlikely that in the future very much more will come to light to add to our knowledge of his life.

The few personal incidents we know about the historian are largely those recounted by himself. That which is most relevant to my theme today recounts how he watched the destruction of the shaft from which this church took its present name. The shaft was, of course, a maypole. The destruction of it took place on Sunday afternoon in 1549 after a sermon at St. Paul's Cross; the result of what must have been a rousing tirade was to persuade the parishioners to remove the offending maypole from the hooks on which it rested above the doors of the houses between St. Mary Axe and Bishopsgate Streets. Thereafter, and evidently in the roadway, it was chopped up – 'mangled' is the word Stow uses – and burnt.

It is no wonder that young John, who would have been about twenty-four at the time, watched with such fascination the proceedings that he eventually recalled the event in detail in the Survey. The family house lay precisely in this row, and though the future historian had never seen the maypole erected – it had not been since 1517, some years before his birth – a degree of nostalgia is apparent in the description for he had known the object at close quarters all his life, and every time he walked in or out of his home he passed beneath it.

One wonders whether such an incident was not the catalyst which decided him to collect facts of history relating to his native city. No reason has ever been advanced why the young John abandoned the ancestral craft of tallow chandlery, but it may be that he considered tailoring, even in working hours, would offer

greater opportunities for social intercourse than the obviously more noisome boiling and moulding of tallow.

The assiduity with which Stow collected information, the comprehensive nature of it and the orderliness of arrangement must forever rouse admiration in view of the pioneer nature of his work. That it is still, after four centuries, a work of constant reference, and that we are here today, is sufficient proof of the general soundness of his descriptions. He achieved all that the circumstances of his time permitted, for so much of what is now available, in the way of documentation, to us was closed to him. Much of the information which he gathered could have been conveniently conveyed by word of mouth while he sat cross-legged at his tailor's bench – a circumstance impossible in his father's and grandfather's trade.

Other influences of which we know nothing may, of course, have made him into a tailor, for already in November 1547 he had been admitted to the freedom of the Merchant Taylors Company, some eighteen months before the maypole incident; it is nevertheless clear that the event was an emotive one for him.

Let us imagine the young Stow in the middle of the roadway to the south of this Church on the day of the destruction of the maypole. We know what he himself could have seen when he looked in any direction of the compass for he has described it. But what would he have seen at an anterior date as far removed from the publication of the Survey as we are posterior to it?

Only eighteen years previously the great Priory of Holy Trinity, Aldgate, had been surrendered to the king; it had dominated this area of the City for over 400 years and though Stow clearly had access to the cartulary of the priory he was unable to turn the information in

it to as good an account as he might have done had he been able to collate it with documents in the central archive of the Corporation of the City.

Looking north, then, from his vantage point at the near crossroads all the property on the right hand side of St. Mary Axe belonged to the Priory of Holy Trinity, being the gift of Queen Matilda, Queen of Henry I when she founded the priory in 1108. It may be stated here, in parenthesis, that in a sparsely inhabited area, Matilda was evidently able to extend her soke and fix her western boundary at the first main street that ran north and south, west of the City Wall. It is possible that before the foundation a strip on the east of St. Mary Axe Street was included in Lime Street Ward but that is an argument for another place.

In our nurseries we were told the tendencies of birds of a feather and it is therefore no surprise to find that, with the priory as landlord, several of the properties on this eastern side of the street were occupied by clerics. In the south, and just to the north of this church was the abbot of Meudon in France; north of him, the abbots of Beeleigh in Essex and Boxley in Kent. The one-time famous rood or Cross of Grace of the Latter House had been broken up at Paul's Cross in 1536, and was perhaps a precedent for the action recorded by Stow regarding the maypole of which mention has been made.

Other lessees followed further north such as the Prior of Ware in Hertfordshire, and the Prior of Pritlewell in Essex. Doubtless all these clerics found it useful, if not essential to have a London base, as much for the sale of the house's agricultural produce as for an amenity. For it must be remembered that English wool, much of it raised by the increasing number of monasteries, was rapidly becoming the country's foremost export.

On the west side of St. Mary Axe Street the little parish church of St. Mary still stood in an attenuated parish since all the east side of the street had been alienated to the priory of Matilda. North and south of the church were the premises of small merchants and craftsmen which will almost all have been timber-framed with a ground floor only and thatched roofs. If

not necessarily stone-built, the houses on the east side of the street rented by the clerics as well as those of intervening laity, seem frequently to have had solars or first floors. A contemporary visitor would have noticed a great difference in the structures of each side.

Turning now westward and looking in the direction of Cornhill, Stow would have seen houses on both sides of the street, as in his own day, differing principally in that there being scarcely a mention of a stone structure, virtually all would have been timber-framed and thatched. The majority of inhabitants were craftsmen, rather than the merchants of his time and amongst these are a number of men described as potters. Here a short diversion is necessary. All modern authorities agree that Billiter Street, the corner of which was visible to Stow from the position in which we have imagined him, is derived from Middle English *Belleyettere* and means the street of the bellfounders. The first to make a detailed study of the relationship between bellfounders and those men described as potters or *olluarii* in Latin, was J. C. L. Stahlschmidt, sometime master of the Worshipful Company of Founders and who published his findings almost a century ago in 1884. His account was confirmed by C. K. Kingsford who published the best edition of Stow's Survey in 1908. Both agree that the pots these craftsmen made were of metal not earthenware; they were, in fact, the antecedents of the members of the later founders of the company and themselves derivative of the still earlier bellfounders. Probably bellfounding was the heaviest industry of the day and, in view of the primitive means of transport the tendency would always have been to found bells as near as possible to the place where they were required. The suggestion is now made that the original colony of bellfounders who gave their name to Billiter Street arose as a result of King Alfred's encouragement to the resettlement of urban areas. The growing number of parish churches in this new Saxon London called for a steady supply of bells and these were provided by founders working on the spot. As the demand slackened, probably in the twelfth century, with a virtual end to the number of new churches, the craftsmen turned to a new

source of livelihood and began to make pots with which may be included all sorts of metal receptacles such as cauldrons. Nevertheless the trade remained within the area and hence it is that so-called potters are found still in their traditional neighbourhood. That this was so is shown by the names of several London citizens who describe themselves as potters but whose names still survive on a few bells which they founded.

Judging by the names by which the church of St. Andrew was known in early centuries – such as St. Andrew upon Cornhill or St. Andrew towards Aldgate, it would seem that no maypole was associated with it until the late 14th or perhaps early 15th century.

If Stow had now turned eastward toward Aldgate he would have found that the scene had changed radically. In the 12th and 13th centuries the road-way between the inside of the gate of Aldgate and almost as far as the Chapel of St. Katherine – known to Stow, as to us, as the Church of St. Katherine Cree – was referred to as the courtyard of the priory. One may suppose that it was in such an area that trade goods arrived and whence they were dispatched. Even the wool-crop of inland religious houses that had no more convenient outlet to the sea than London may well have been centred here before onward despatch via the Custom House on the Thames-side to probable destinations in Flanders. Aldgate Pump, then a well, would have been used for baiting the numerous pack-animals involved.

On the north side of the street and at the east end a number of shallow shops and residences backed on to the priory wall over which the upper part of the priory church would have been visible. St. Katherine Cree itself is referred to at that date as a chapel and as standing in the cemetery of Holy Trinity. One may deduce that it served as a mortuary chapel. That it later, and indeed long before Stow's day had become a parish church – and this as early as the first half of the 13th century – is a matter of known history. Doubtless this development was caused by the increase of the local population, largely as a result of the greater chances of employment offered by the priors.

Between Creechurch Lane and the east end

of the churchyard of this church of St. Andrew a row of houses stood in the mid-thirteenth century which were divided by a footpath running north and south and, at the northern end, very much on the line of the present Bury Street. Hereabouts, owning some of the houses and apparently living in one, was an early London character who figures, not infrequently, in property transactions – not so much as a principal but as an abutment owner. He was a weaver and his name was Wedde de Theiden which possibly indicates an Essex origin, perhaps from Theydon. One may suppose that he was an affable and friendly man and popular with the neighbours since his nickname was so far current that even in the formal language of the hustings rolls he is most frequently referred to, rather endearingly, as Weddie the Weaver. I mention this as something that brings a touch of humanity to the often all too dry bones of documentary history.

On the south side of what we now call Leadenhall Street but was then as often called Aldgate or Aldgate Street, and at the eastern end there were unearthed in the mid-eighteenth century the foundations of what was declared to be an ecclesiastical building in the account given in the *Gentlemen's Magazine*, and these were ascribed to the small church of St. Michael which was known to have been hereabouts. This ascription has appeared on the map of the Ordnance Survey since 1875; however, recent archival research shows that this little church which was, in fact, a parish church, stood almost opposite but slightly west of St. Katherine Cree. Of what then, if indeed they were ecclesiastical, were these remains? There is mention in the cartulary of Holy Trinity of a church which had been established within Aldgate by one Syredus and it would seem that it was unfinished at the time of the founding of the priory in 1108. In the light of actual knowledge it cannot be certain whether these remains are in fact those of Syredus' church, but the possibility remains. Certainly it was taken over and even demolished by Norman, the first prior of Holy Trinity.

The church of St. Michael can be very exactly sited as being forty-four yards, on the

basis of the *compositio* of either Henry III or Edward I, from the corner of Billiter Street. Small as the church was it would have been a landmark on the south side of the street for our historian looking eastwards. A garden described as belonging to Holy Trinity stood next to the church on the east, and next to that, land and a house leased to the abbot of Sibton (Suffolk). Thus yet another ecclesiastic is added to the list of those who found it necessary to have a town residence. Westward of St. Michael's until the house at the corner of Billiter Street is reached was open space. Between Billiter Street and Lime Street were a number of houses which, from the description of some of the owners seem to have been rather larger and of better class than most. Again some were inhabited by potters.

Had our historian not turned right about and looked south down Lime Street he would have found nothing more readily apparent as an explanation for the name than what he himself wrote, that 'it takyth the name of making and selling lime there (as is supposed)'. By this wary phrase it might be supposed that Stow was not altogether happy as to why lime was in fact made hereabouts. The fact of its actual making is not disputed by any modern authority but it is now time to ask definitely Stow's half-posed question: why should lime ever have been produced particularly in this neighbourhood?

Professor Christopher Brook has recently shown that while London was not entirely deserted after the Roman evacuation it was as a result of the policy of re-urbanisation encouraged by Alfred the Great that what we now call Anglo-Saxon London began to come into being.

As a building material stone could never have been easily available in London. The transport and the dressing of it would have made the cost almost prohibitive in early times even if the Saxons had been familiar with its use. In fact those of the London region were not and their buildings, even the more important, were timber-framed with walls of lath and plaster. The Romans themselves found it necessary for their public buildings to transport ragstone, the nearest source for which was Kent, by barge up the Thames.

Since lime for the making of plaster is and always was a comparatively low-price material it does not stand the expense of long distance transport and so the choice of site for its production must depend primarily on the proximity of available limestone. We may now ask why such a site as the general area of Lime Street ward was chosen when Alfred's craftsmen began work.

Excavation in recent years below York Minster has shown that Roman buildings were still standing and possibly in use in the late 10th century. A survival of considerable ruins in other cities and in particular London would therefore not have been unique.

When Roman London was being meticulously excavated in the years since Hitler's war it became apparent, as was to be expected, that the great majority of public buildings were centred round the forum which itself ran east and west across the present Gracechurch Street. The excavators noted somewhat to their surprise and some disappointment that the stonework had survived for only a small number of courses. There was furthermore no evidence of the survival of Roman material even in the few stone-built structures of Norman London. When and whither did the considerable amount of Roman work disappear?

Taking the fact enumerated and stressing the point that Kentish ragstone is an admirable raw material for the production of lime I suggest that the ancient forum, some buildings of which, on the analogy of York may still have been standing, became the quarry whence the new urban dwellers, resultant on Alfred's policy, provided building lime for the resurgent City.

The 10th and 11th centuries saw the creation of wards and parishes, the former in the first instance mostly known by the names of their respective alderman. By the 12th century, when the first ward list occurs, Lime Street is not indentifiable and was, in fact, one of the smallest and poorest wards in the City. But it had had its heyday two centuries before and may have been one of the first subdivisions of the City at a date when it was providing the new settlers with their first large-scale building material.

Thus with the final reduction of Roman London to lime, preparatory to its re-emergence on a plan much of which still

survives today, we may leave young Stow in the street outside this church, pondering the history he was one day to write.