

# JOHN STOW

## COMMEMORATION ADDRESS BY PETER JACKSON

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We are here today to do honour to John Stow the amateur historian whose great Survey, published in 1598, was London's first guide book. We do not know exactly where he was born but he was certainly a Londoner born within the sound of Bow Bells in the year 1525, and he died here in 1605 when he was nearly 80. It is fitting that we should honour him here, for this was his parish church. Here he was buried and here today we may see his monument set up, as the inscription says, by his "sorrowing wife Elizabeth as a perpetual witness of her love." There is also a wonderful Latin motto which translated reads, "Either do something worth writing about, or write something worth reading." Stow certainly did that.

How often, I wonder, has his name been remembered in this place; many, many times, but probably not often enough, for the debt we owe him is incalculable. Surely there can be no city in the world whose early history and topography owes so much to a single individual as London owes to John Stow. We must never forget that London is a unique case; as we all know, it was almost totally destroyed in the Great Fire of 1666, so if Stow had not existed, if he had not written his survey when he did, how much would we know of what Elizabethan London looked like. The answer is, very little indeed.

There were no histories, no guides, not even a map in the modern sense of the word. So what did Stow himself use as a source for all the information he gives us?

True there was the well-known bird's-eye view of Elizabethan London published by Braun and Hogenberg in 1572 and, of course, the large wood-cut map attributed to Ralph Agas. Stow would have known both of these of course. In recent years the discovery of the two copper-plate sections of a large-scale picture map leads us to fascinating areas of speculation. No copy of this map is known to exist today but there seems little doubt that it once did. The map would have measured 8 feet wide by 5 feet deep and it is pleasant to imagine it pinned up on the wall of Stow's room for him to refer to as he wrote up the notes he had made during his perambulations. This is how Stow must have written his Survey; by methodically walking the streets with a notebook in his hand, for he had no general works of reference to guide him. He had a good library it is true, and a large collection of manuscripts. Indeed his collection was known as "Stow's store-house" and grew so large that it was probably the reason why he moved from his lodgings by Aldgate Pump to a house near Leadenhall. He could call upon the Chronicles of Hall and Fabian and Holinshed but they would have been of little use to him topographically. No; Stow surveyed his London on his two feet—"my feet which have borne me many a mile" as he said himself. This is quite obvious when reading the Survey. We find him poking into little courts and alleys, looking around parish churches—all 126 of them—visiting the places he had known in his youth and

lamenting the changes that had taken place. He never found that they were changes for the better, I need hardly say.

What would he think of the changes that have taken place in recent years one wonders. A city has to change, even Stow had to face this fact in his own lifetime, and of course the Great Fire changed everything almost overnight. Yet when London was rebuilt it was rebuilt on the old plan, new buildings arose almost always along the same old street or lane with the same frontage lines so that for 300 years after Stow's death it was still possible to actually follow in his footsteps. This can no longer be done. Whole areas have been transformed out of all recognition. The direction of the building lines have been altered and many alleys and lanes have totally disappeared. So what would Stow think of it all? Let us imagine for a moment that Stow has returned to us. What would we show him of modern London? Firstly he would no doubt be delighted to see that this, his very own church, had survived the Great Fire and two World Wars, although it has undergone some alterations and so-called improvements, he would undoubtedly recognise it. I can't help feeling that he may well approve of the changes that have taken place just outside the door, because, owing to the creation of that great open piazza opposite, you can now get a much better of this church than ever before in its long history. Certainly Stow never saw it as well as he could see it today.

What he would think of the great tower blocks is another matter. It is not, however, difficult to guess because we know that Stow did not approve of towers. He did not like the way they overlooked their neighbours. He can not conceal a certain grim satisfaction in citing two cases of tower building which brought their owners no luck at all. One "Sir John Champness Alderman and Mayor built a

high tower of brick, the first I ever heard of in any man's private house, to overlook his neighbours in the City. But this delight of his eye was punished with blindness before his death." In another case the owner "became in short time so tormented with Goute" that he was unable to climb the stairs and "take the pleasure of the height of his Tower."

Is there anything we can show him today that he would enjoy seeing? Probably to his amazement we could show him a few survivals which he would recognize. The Tower, the Abbey, St. Bartholomew-the-Great, Temple Church, Staple Inn perhaps, the Jewel Tower of Westminster Palace certainly.

But what about showing him the London he did not know, not because it was built after his time, that would be easy, but things which actually existed in his day but which he did not know were there. Take for instance the Saxon door in the Church of All Hallows by the Tower which only came to light after the Blitz. Did Stow ever see it? He certainly does not mention it. Then there is the Temple of Mithras, we have no way of knowing when that vanished from sight but certainly it was already buried beneath Medieval London by the time Stow was writing. How excited he would be to see that.

But if I were allowed to take Stow to just one place in today's London, I would take him to the Barbican and stand with him in what was once the churchyard of St. Giles Cripplegate. He would be delighted to see that church much as he knew it and he would recognize the Cripplegate bastion on the angle of the City wall. Here again he would see something he never knew existed; in the wall just here are the remains of a medieval bastion which was only discovered in 1965 during excavations. It does not appear on any of the early maps and it must have vanished

from eight years before Stow was born. What would thrill Stow more than anything else here, however, is the restoration of the City ditch; the moat which once surrounded the City. As a boy Stow saw men fishing in the clean and open ditch and probably did so himself. By the time he was writing his Survey it had been built over in many places and what water was left had become a cesspool. How pleased he would be to see it once again teeming with fish and see the ancient walls reflected in its clean waters.

There is, though, one thing more. Stow

refers to something in this area that he was told about but never saw. "There was," he wrote "near unto the parsonage, on the west side thereof, a fair pool of clean water which was filled up in the reign of Henry VI ---".

Well that same "fair pool of clear water" is back again. Did the planners of the Barbican, I wonder, know about this ancient water when they created their lake on exactly the same spot which was pointed out to Stow all those years ago? I like to think so, and I am sure Stow would enjoy it.