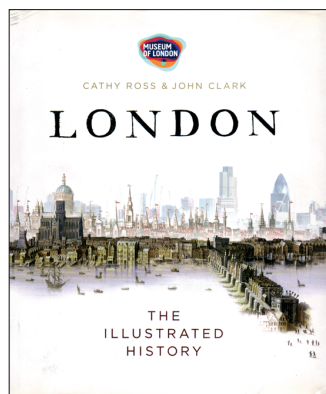


London The Illustrated History



Cathy Ross and John Clark

2008

Allen Lane/Penguin

352 pages

many colour images and maps,
index, reading list

£30

Reviewed by Becky Wallower

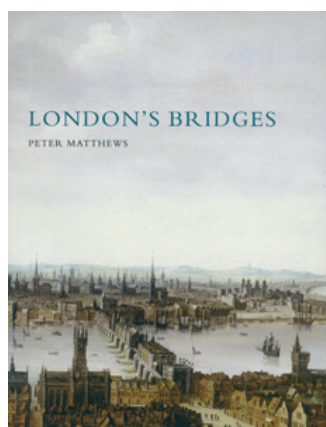
As a teacher of the history of London for an American lifelong education programme, I'm drawn to any new book that might appeal to students and give me a new perspective. But when a glossy picture book appears, I can't help but wonder: what will this add to a standard history? Who is the intended reader? Does it have any merit beyond decorating a coffee table? Turning through the early sections of this particular hefty volume – a collection of text by experts from the Museum of London (26 of them) and Royal Holloway College (two of them) and many hundred images (mostly from the Museum) – left me rather wary. The chapters on prehistoric and Roman London, those most associated with archaeology, seemed awfully familiar from

countless other Museum of London and MoLAS publications.

By the time I'd digested the early medieval section however, I was hooked. It's current, I thought, spotting Saxon finds from the recent Prittlewell and St Martin's in the Fields excavations. And there are some new, helpful maps, of Westminster and the Strand for instance. And that chapter on the medieval Jewish community is interesting... So on I read. Or browsed, rather. The book is set out chronologically, but as the sections within each period are short and thematic, it lends itself to dipping in and skipping around. Some of the themes, such as those dealing with health and healthcare, trade and industry, transport, immigrants or leisure recur in several periods generating a sense of development. Others, such as 'Banking transformed' or 'The Welfare State' emphasise a unique aspect of the era.

The style is interesting and varied, production values very high and the scope ambitious, but I do have a few quibbles. The balance is much skewed to the modern period, with the past two centuries taking nearly half the book. This bias could be seen as proportional as that is when most of London's development took place, but it will disappoint some. The recent history features some absorbing topics though – outcast and underworld figures, costermongers and cockneys, and the battle of Cable Street for example – and it's bang up to date, right up to Olympic developments and climate change. I also spotted a few editing errors and inconsistencies between text and captions. The many maps greatly aid understanding; although their symbols sometimes verge on the twee, they will help draw in casual readers. With a text to image ratio of about 50:50, this book can't offer comprehensive coverage of any period or theme, but as an overview or introduction to London it provides both a good chronology and plenty of fascinating detail. Definitely one for my course booklist.

London's Bridges



Peter Matthews

2008

Shire

176 pp

colour and b&w illustrations,
bibliography, index

£12.99

Reviewed by Peter Rowsome

If you think you know London well, here is a little quiz. Name the 33 bridges that span the Thames within Greater London, starting with Hampton Court Bridge in the west and ending with Tower Bridge in the east, including rail and foot bridges. Extra points if you can get them in the correct order.

This new book covers a fascinating subject that includes the history of the bridges, their architecture and engineering, and some of the human stories associated with them. The text is well-written and accessible, whilst clearly well-researched, as you would expect from Peter Matthews, who is a Blue Badge Guide and manager of the Museum of London bookshop. The book is illustrated with colour photographs, paintings and drawings. The story of London's bridges is of course a potted history of the expansion of London itself, also charting the growth of the population and development of new transport, most apparent in the 19th century.

This is a full-sized paperback rather than a small guide book, which you might read at home or take along on a walk down the Thames Path, as each bridge is given its own chapter of at least a couple of pages, with the bridges presented in order, from west to east. The book does not include a map, but one is not essential. A section on further reading points the way to more detailed information on particular bridges.

It is sometimes said that London turned its back on the Thames in the late 20th century as the commercial use of the river declined, but this trend is slowly changing, thanks in part to the construction of new foot bridges and improved access to the river. Wondering what to do on a Sunday afternoon or two this summer? Buy a copy of *London's Bridges*, catch a train up to west London and get started! It will improve your quiz results.