

# DARK CAPITAL

Gothic Walks  
around London

James Rattue



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*Cover: the Royal Horseguards Hotel, 1 Whitehall Place*

*Frontispiece: The Vinegar Warehouse, Eastcheap -  
'the scream you awaken to at the end of a nightmare'*

Published by the Umbra Press, 2023

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# Introduction

London Gothic, as its members tended to call the London Goth Meetup Group, was a great organisation, as far I as concerned; others disagreed. A prominent music producer and promoter in the Goth world was once interviewed in a leading scene magazine at the time and complained that London Goths no longer seemed that interested in music and clubs but preferred to visit exhibitions and go on walks. Only the LGMG was organising walks so you couldn't help but take it a *bit* personally, even though its members also seemed to be as fond of music and clubs as anyone else, as far as I could tell.

When I got involved, LGMG was run by the Young Lord Declan and Lady Minerva. Declan was (and still is) a great history enthusiast and some time before I joined the group in 2007 had found an outlet for this by leading walks around the city for LGMG members, examining various abstruse aspects of London's past which could very broadly be bracketed as part of the Gothic continuum. After a couple of years of tagging along, I found myself so grateful for Declan and Minerva's efforts that I thought it might be welcomed if I offered to do a walk of my own so they could relax a bit. And so I dredged into my knowledge of the City's religious past and came up with *Crypts and Clerics* in which I led a motley collection of Goths round a variety of central London churches culminating in actually getting access to Hawksmoor's masterpiece, St Mary Woolnoth. It went down well enough for me to risk a second go, and a third, and so on.

My walks were not even a quarter of the total, but for some time I've thought it might be good if they didn't vanish completely into the mists of the past but were actually recorded somewhere. Hence this booklet. You could even go and find the places mentioned yourself! The length of the walks differs, and London being what it is, it's quite possible that in following a route you might find that something has been blocked off, or even swept away completely – the built environment doesn't stand still. Alternatively, you can go for a virtual walk round the stranger side of the city from the relaxation of a chair and with a comforting cup of tea in hand.

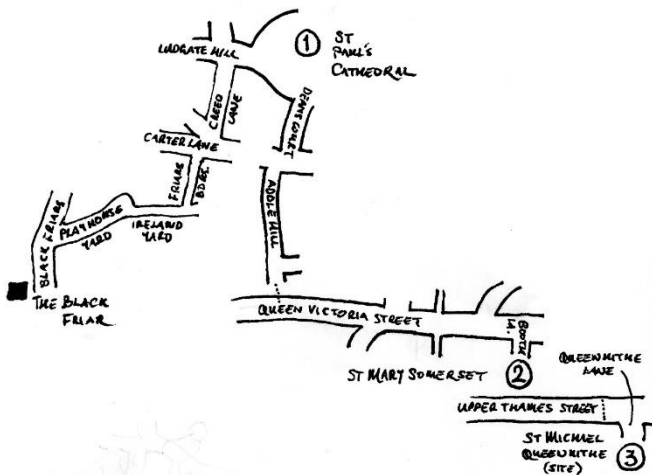
## 1. Walk 12 – Crypts & Clerics: the City Churches, 21 March 2009

This Goth Walk was a logical one for me to begin with, being an Anglican priest. There was no story as such to follow, apart from that of the general development of London which has led to the gradual emptying of the City to the point that it has barely any permanent residents. I always quote the example of a friend who became vicar of St Andrew's, Holborn, the church whose parish includes some of the legal district around Fetter Lane: when he moved in, there were only four names on the civil electoral roll – of which his own was one. But the walk does give you an idea of the history and variety of the City Churches. The title fitted in with Declan's early habit of alliteration; we didn't actually go in a crypt, though we did take in a ruin.

It turned out to be a bright, mild Spring day. Clad in cassock and biretta, I began with a quotation from John Betjeman's poem 'Monody', a recollection in verse of the bombed-out churches of London:

*Last of the east wall sculpture, a cherub gazes  
On broken arches, rosebay, bracken and dock,  
Where once I heard the roll of the Prayer Book phrases  
And the sumptuous tick of the old west gallery clock.*

From the yard of the Black Friar we went to our first stop – the steps of St Paul’s Cathedral.



## I. *St Paul's Cathedral*

Within the square mile of the City of London, thirty-nine ancient churches survive, with the towers remaining from nine more. 86 burned down in the Great Fire in 1666, and only 51 were ever rebuilt. Between 1782 and 1926, another 23 were demolished, and five were destroyed by bombing in World War Two. So, before the Reformation in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, there were nearly a *hundred churches* inside this relatively small area. It makes you wonder how they all fitted in. And this great building, not the oldest church in the City, but obviously the grandest, and possibly built on the site of the *praetorium* of the Roman city, is the right place to begin.

Thanks to the Great Fire, there is one person most associated with architecture, and especially church architecture, within the City of London – being, of course, Sir Christopher Wren. Sir John Betjeman says that his ‘cheerful genius’ pervades the whole of the City, though however cheerful he may have been he was a gloomier figure by the end of his career as architectural fashion moved on and his own work fell out of favour to an extent. But St Paul’s is naturally and rightly his most celebrated building. The medieval cathedral was gutted in the Great Fire and though it might have been possible to reconstruct it, the decision was taken to rebuild it completely. Wren’s design (this one isn’t what he originally wanted, but it’s not too far off) wasn’t universally popular: some felt it looked much too *Catholic*. But he worked on it for nearly 40 years, and famously the inscription above his tomb in the Crypt includes the words *Lector, si monumentum requiris, circumspice*: ‘Reader, if you seek his monument, look around you’.

This whole area is a bit like an English version of the Vatican, even down to the street names: Amen Corner, Ave Maria Lane, Paternoster Square – you can’t escape religion here! And for hundreds of years St Paul’s had on its staff the only two priests in the Church of England who officially bore the title of *Cardinal*. The two Cardinal Canons headed the College of Minor Canons from before the year 1378 when Pope Urban VI confirmed their right to the title, right through to 2016 when the College was abolished, which I think a great shame. However despite their titles they wouldn’t have been welcome had they turned up at the Sistine Chapel to vote in the Papal election, especially as several holders of the posts have been women. Most of the Cardinals of St Paul’s are just names in a list, but one of the Victorian ones became very famous in his day: Richard Barham, author of a best-selling collection of ghost stories called *The Ingoldsby Legends*, which are sometimes funny, and sometimes very creepy indeed. He made the best of his time! We discuss him a little later in the Walk.

## ***II. St Mary Somerset***

9 churches in the City now exist only as towers, and this is one of them. The church was burned down in the Great Fire, rebuilt in 1695, and demolished in 1872, only the tower being saved. In 1803 one writer reported that ‘the late well-known Methodist Mr Gunn was preacher here on certain days. The dirty and trampled state of the church may well be imagined’ – which makes you rather think, was the stampede of muddy feet leading in or out?

Before World War Two the tower was used as a ladies’ loo. Now unfortunately I have some experience of church porches being used as toilets, but not perhaps in this formalised way.

The name ‘St Mary Somerset’ leads us to the question of what London churches are called. The City had 14 churches dedicated to the Virgin Mary, so you needed some means of distinguishing between them, hence the additional names. St Mary’s has no connection with the County of Somerset; it’s been suggested that there’s some link to a medieval landowner called Ralph de Sowerby, though I’m not sure why as the Sowerby family’s lands were mainly in the West Midlands, not the West Country. The other explanation is that the church was linked to Summers Hithe, a landing-point on the river a little way off. Some of my favourite City church names include St Michael le Querne (named because there was once a corn-market in the churchyard, and *quern-stones* were used to grind corn); St Thomas in the Rolls (which was in the Liberty of the Rolls, a tiny independent area separate from the City named after a house where legal records were kept – hence the title of the Master of the Rolls); and finally St Benet’s Sherehog (named after a sheep, specifically ‘a castrated ram after its first shearing’, because it was in the wool-dealing area of the City).

On the way to our next stop, do look out for St James Garlickhythe, famous because of the mummified body discovered beneath the chancel in 1855, and nicknamed ‘Jimmy Garlick’. He should really have been re-buried, but the churchwardens decided to keep him above ground and charge visitors to look at him – and there he still is!

## ***III. St Michael Queenhithe***

The eagle-eyed among you will have noticed that there is no church here! This is the site of St Michael Queenhithe, one of the churches that was demolished

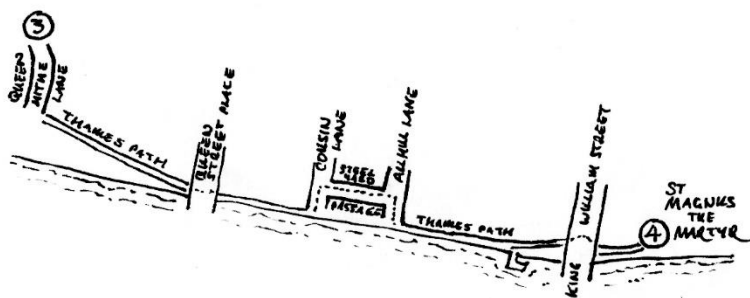
because the depopulation of the City of London meant it was no longer needed. Today, 340,000 people work in the square mile of the City (or did so before the covid pandemic), but fewer than a thousand live there, making it, paradoxically, a very urban area but with a relatively low population density.

The Union of Benefices Act was passed in 1860 to allow parishes in old urban areas like the City to be amalgamated, and St Michael Queenhithe was closed in 1876. The money used from the sale of the site was used to buy the land for, and to build, St Michael's Camden (next to Sainsbury's), a pattern you'll find elsewhere.

At the same time as City churches were being closed because people had moved away, the suburbs were burgeoning. For instance, in 1820 Bethnal Green had only one church, the old parish church of St Matthew, which was already pretty overwhelmed by a population within the parish of 46,000. The population of Bethnal Green went up by 20,000 every ten years, and the area suffered from huge social issues at the same time – unemployment because of the decline of silk loom-weaving, overcrowding, and poor sanitation. A health commission report in 1848 stated 'it is notorious that an enormous part of the people are unhealthy, without vigour or strength, pallid and pathetic, stunted in their growth'.

Into this area in 1823 came James Mayne, ordained unusually late at the age of 39, having served two country parishes before coming to London. The Rector of Bethnal Green, Joshua King, had had to have the chairman of the vestry convicted for corruption and brothel-keeping, and his own predecessor had been driven out by opposition. Five years into James Mayne's curacy, Mr King left his curate to run the parish. For three years he managed alone, carrying out each year roughly 800 baptisms, 180 weddings, and 670 funerals, and at the same time organised the extension of St Matthew's church and the building of a new daughter church, parish school, and workhouse. Over 1831-2 he had to deal with the appalling cholera epidemic, huge unemployment and a situation of near-revolution: in contrast with the usual image of 19<sup>th</sup>-century Anglican clergymen as being dyed-in-the-wool Tories, Mr Mayne chaired the Bethnal Green association agitating for the passage of the Great Reform Bill in 1832, as well as the Association for the Relief of the Destitute Poor of Bethnal Green. In 1842, when Mr Mayne was 67, he left to become vicar of a tiny village in Buckinghamshire called Hanslope, where he had a curate of his own to do most of the work and could have a bit of a rest!

City clergymen did not always have to work so hard, as we shall see.



#### IV. St Magnus the Martyr

The City churches may not have many people living in their parishes but they often have lots of money. For instance I mentioned St Andrew's Holborn where my friend Michael was vicar; much of St Andrew's' funds comes from a charity established by John Thavie, the founder of Thavies Inn, in the 15<sup>th</sup> century – 600 years of compound interest amounts to a tidy sum! The City churches also often have the support of the Guilds, the London trade associations which are frequently linked with individual churches. Some are ancient and picturesque, like the Cordwainers, or the Plumbers here at St Magnus; and some aren't. If you work in marketing or PR, for instance, your Guild church is St Bartholomew the Great in Smithfield.

Once upon a time a job at a City church was ideal for a clergyman who was a bit out of the mainstream. When we were at St Paul's Cathedral we mentioned Richard Barham, who was one of the Cardinals at the Cathedral and then became Rector of St Mary Magdalene, Fish Street, which, according to one writer, 'allowed him opportunity to browse among the volumes of fables and superstitions' – or, in other words, he had very little actual work to do. The book he's best known for, *The Ingoldsby Legends*, builds on those folk stories and fables and hangs them off the history of a fictitious family living in a run-down manor house in Kent where Revd Barham himself came from. The stories are known for their humour, horror, and awful rhymes. For instance, here's a bit from 'The Hand of Glory':

*On the lone bleak moor, at the midnight hour,  
Beneath the gallows tree,  
Hand in hand the Murderers stand,  
By one, by two, by three!  
And the Moon that night with a cold, grey light  
Each baleful object tips;  
One half of her form is seen through the storm,*

*The other half's in Eclipse!  
And the cold Wind howls, and the Thunder growls,  
And the Lightning is broad and bright;  
And altogether it's very bad weather,  
And an unpleasant sort of a night!  
"Now mount who list, and close by the wrist,  
Sever me quickly the dead man's fist!  
Now climb who dare where he swings in air,  
And pluck me five locks of the dead man's hair!"*

Here at St Magnus the great figure associated with the church was Fr Henry Fynes-Clinton, who became an expert on Church ritual, especially the Byzantine liturgy, and remodelled the inside of his church. Most of the City churches are sort of moderate High Church Anglican, or very traditional and use the 1662 Book of Common Prayer for their services. St Magnus, however, looks more like a Spanish Catholic church in about 1953. But on the other side of the city you can find St Helen's Bishopsgate, which is right at the opposite end of the Church spectrum. After it was bombed by the IRA in 1993 the church was entirely reordered inside, and now it's one of those places where the focus isn't the altar but the drum kit and a big screen hanging from the ceiling. How wonderfully broad the Church of England is ...

On the way to our next stop we go through the picturesque ruins of St Dunstan-in-the-East. This church was destroyed by bombing in the Second World War and then became a public garden.

## ***V. St Olave Hart Street***

This was the parish church of Samuel Pepys the diarist, and also the last resting-place of Mary Ramsey who brought the Plague to London in 1665 – or at least, she was its first known victim. But we've come here because of the gateway. This is what Charles Dickens says about it:

*One of my best beloved churchyards, I call the churchyard of Saint Ghastly Grim; touching what men in general call it, I have no information [he was not telling the truth there]. It lies at the heart of the City, and the Blackwall Railway shrieks at it daily. It is a small, small churchyard, with a ferocious, strong spiked iron gate, like a jail. This gate is ornamented with skulls and cross-bones, larger than the life, wrought in stone; but it likewise came into the mind of Saint Ghastly Grim, that to stick iron spikes a-top of the stone skulls, as though they were impaled, would be a pleasant device. Therefore the skulls grin aloft horribly, thrust through and through with iron spears. Hence, there is attraction of repulsion for me in Saint Ghastly Grim, and,*



simply by exposure to the rank air. However nothing was done until 1839 when the Commissioners of Sewers decided to lay a new sewer through the cellar at Enon Chapel. The workmen sent in found bodies piled on top of each other in varying states of decomposition. In the end the Commissioners counted 12,000 corpses deposited in a space no more than 59 feet long by 12 feet wide. Mr and Mrs House generally tipped the bodies out of coffins and used the wood for firewood. The Chapel was closed but not demolished until 1847 when the bodies, or what was left of them, were taken to the new cemetery at Norwood for re-interment – those that *had* been buried in the first place.

In 1854 all the central London churchyards were closed and many of the burials were removed to the new cemeteries in the suburbs such as Highgate and Nunhead, and eventually even as far as Brookwood in Surrey. At St Bride's Fleet Street Christopher Wren built the new church in 1672, but he retained the remains of the previous six churches on the site as crypts. These were only fully rediscovered when St Bride's was rebuilt after World War Two, including over 200 individual bodies and the remains of 7000 other people in a charnel. The crypts are open if you want to go. That's where they have the Sunday School, too.

## *VI. St Peter upon Cornhill*

Here we're on the highest point of the City of London, and directly above the old Roman basilica. This is a church of ancient and doubtful stories. The legend grew up that it had been founded by Lucius, the first Christian King of Britain, in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century. This story was recorded in the 7<sup>th</sup> century by the Venerable Bede, so it goes back a long way; also, there was certainly a Bishop of London in the early 4<sup>th</sup> century, and he must have had a church as his episcopal seat. But there's no definite evidence that Lucius existed so we have to leave a question mark over the whole tradition.

Then there is the business of the Cornhill Devils. Next to St Peter's is 54-55 Cornhill, designed by Ernest Runtz in 1893. Perhaps inadvertently, perhaps carelessly, when he drew up the plans for the rebuilt structure, Mr Runtz clipped off a few feet of land belonging to the church. The then vicar was enraged and began legal action which eventually forced the architect, at great cost, to revise his plans. In revenge – so it is said – Mr Runtz inserted three absolutely ferocious devil gargoyles into the design of the building, one of which, as a final insult, had features modelled on the vicar's own. And there they remain, mocking passersby and especially anyone daring to go to Divine Worship at St Peter's.

Nobody knows whether that's actually true. A more secure story connected with St Peter's is that of Elizabeth Mounsey, who became organist at the church in 1834 when she was 14, and stayed here until she resigned due to deafness 48 years later, a renowned composer and virtually the only woman member of the Royal Philharmonic Society when she was elected in 1842.

A story about a bad-tempered clergyman leads us to the sad truth that not all clerics are what they should be. Over in Bethnal Green, long after James Mayne moved on, the parish eventually acquired twelve daughter churches, each named after one of Jesus's disciples (apart from Judas). In 1858 the recently-retired vicar of Bethnal Green described some of his colleagues in a letter, which is worth quoting from at length:

St Peter's [not this one, the one in Bethnal Green] retains Mr Packer as incumbent – who is a worthy man, without much energy – the church about half filled on Sundays.

At St Andrew's, the present incumbent, Mr Parker, has become a great politician, and tells the very few people who attend his church that they should read nothing but the Bible and the newspaper – the destinies of the French Empire form the perpetual theme of his sermons ... His schools are shut up – his church almost empty.

St Philip's was, for many years, the scene of Mr Alston's vagaries, who annoyed the Bishop and tormented and defrauded the clergy around by marrying for 2s 6d. Thus he brought people from all parts of London to be married at his church, and used frequently to join together 50 couples *per diem*. Mr Trevitt, his successor, is a most amiable man, very lax and liberal in his notions ... He also marries at a lower price (though not so low as 2s 6d) than any of the rest of us, and hence carries on a successful trade in that way – but his church is very poorly attended.

St James the Less, Victoria Park, has proved a uniform failure till recently. The first incumbent, Mr Coghlan, was a most extravagant and wordy man – and after being there some years to the injury and disgrace of the Church – left over head and ears in debt. He was succeeded by a Mr Haughton. *He* had an aversion to coming into contact with poor people ... he would have no schools built ... he was a sort of perpetual blister to our late good Bishop.

At St James the Great, Mr James proved a very inefficient and immoral man; his wife and children being in the country, and he remaining at home, he went to bed with his servant maid. This was in some sort hushed up, but the matter was so well known in the parish that his

usefulness was at an end here. Therefore he exchanged livings with Mr Coke.

Mr Coke out-Herods Herod. He has shut up his schools, although they have an endowment of £1000, and having bought a house for his wife and family at Tottenham he is seldom in residence: every winter, and all through the year, he collects large sums for the poor by advertisements – and no one knows what becomes of the money. About four weeks ago he knocked down a pauper in his hall who asked him for a receipt for some shillings he had been sent with from the chairman of the Board of Guardians. He seldom has 20 people in his church; and I am sorry to say that at St James the Great it is indeed ‘death in the pot’.

St Simon Zelotes had for the first incumbent, Mr Ansted, a truly excellent man, but he was so out of health that for the most part he was compelled to be away from home. His wife was a forward, meddling and quarrelsome person, who by her frequent indiscretions did great injury to the district. The present incumbent, Mr Christie – ah, Mr Christie – is a *slug in the vineyard of the Lord!*

Our final stop is the most remarkable-looking church in the City. We’ll approach it by a roundabout route so you get the full impact!

### ***VII. St Mary Woolnoth***

Here we are at the dead centre of the City, above the sites of Roman and Anglo-Saxon buildings. The anti-slavery campaigner (and former slave ship master) John Newton was Rector here in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and Bank station is directly underneath us. In fact, when the station was built the City & South London Railway got permission to pull the church down, and only a public outcry prevented them: in the end, they just took over the crypts. The medieval church of St Mary Woolnoth was damaged in the Great Fire, repaired by Christopher Wren, and then rebuilt in 1716 by that strange and fascinating figure, Wren’s former pupil and assistant, Nicholas Hawksmoor.

Hawksmoor, in fact, is a figure *so* strange that there is an entire separate Goth Walk devoted to him, so we will say only a little about him here. Suffice it to say that his current dark reputation is really down to the writer Iain Sinclair who claimed in his 1975 work of ‘psychogeography’ *Lud Heat* that Hawksmoor’s churches were deliberately arranged in a pattern that reflected malignant and occult forces operating within London:

Eight churches give the shape of the fear: erected over a fen of undisclosed horrors, white stones laid upon the mud and dust. In this air certain hungers were activated that have yet to be pacified: no turning back, the stones once set up traffic with the Enemy ... His motives remain opaque, his churches are the mediums, filled with the dust of wooden voices.

Sinclair's ideas were then taken up by Peter Ackroyd. In his 1985 novel *Hawksmoor*, 'Hawksmoor' is the name of the modern detective investigating a series of murders at the sites of the churches built by Nicholas Dyer in the 1700s. Of course this is all fantasy: there is no evidence at all that the *real* Nicholas Hawksmoor was a Satanist who consecrated every church he designed with a human sacrifice. And yet, the more you contemplate those churches, the weirder they seem to look, which is why on this Walk we approach St Mary's from the front so you can see how it really resembles no other church in the world – just like the rest Hawksmoor designed.

That brings us to the end of our journey around the City churches and their history. As we began, we finish with poetry. TS Eliot brought this church into the first part of his great masterpiece *The Waste Land* – or at least its clock. He's writing in the context of the aftermath of World War One, and in his imagination the commuter crowds flowing out of Bank Station mirror the War's dead and are as good as dead themselves; but like all great poetry it could really be about any time, recalling the vast, untellable numbers of those who have gone before us, the dead of the City, and of everywhere:

*Unreal city,  
Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,  
A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,  
I had not thought death had undone so many.  
Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled,  
And each man fixed his eyes before his feet.  
Flowed up the hill and down King William Street,  
To where Saint Mary Woolnoth kept the hours  
With a dead sound on the final stroke of nine.*



*Approaching St Dunstan-in-the-East – photo by Mr Bowerman*



*‘St Ghastly Grim’ –  
photo by Simon Landmine*

## 2. Walk 17 – Pinnacles & Polychrome: the Gothic Revival in London, 20 March 2010

Gothic Revival architecture was another topic that I already knew something about, so I could begin planning my Goth Walk about the subject from more than just a standing start. I wanted to construct a Walk that took in a variety of the most interesting and characteristic Gothic Revival buildings around London, some of them grand and well-known, and some of them very humble, and realised that the route I constructed would be considerably longer than we were used to. I decided to build in a break halfway through, so as well as starting and finishing at a pub, we also called into one on the way; picking The Dolphin at Kings Cross meant we could leave via the alleyway onto Euston Road, thus revealing George Gilbert Scott's Grand Midland Hotel in all its glory. What the proprietors made of thirty or so black-clad and damp folk suddenly turning up unannounced (it wasn't the best weather), I am not sure. The Walk ended at All Saints' Margaret Street, which we reached just as a wedding was ending: the bride wore red and the bridesmaids *black* and red, which everyone found very appropriate.

A sub-theme of the walk was the lives of the Gothic Revival architects themselves. A remarkably high proportion of them seemed to have gone mad, killed themselves, become bankrupt or fallen into addiction, and often combinations of those misfortunes: Gothic, then, in their own right. Whether they were mad before they started, or designing Gothic buildings drove them out of their minds, is a debatable matter.

In a convenient corner near the Cheshire Cheese, I gave the walkers a brief outline of the Gothic Revival:

Gothic architecture goes into eclipse after about 1550; there was some (especially in weird places like Oxford), but it was generally disliked by educated people. In 1624, the diplomat, politician and writer Sir Henry Wootton wrote:

Both for the natural imbecility of the sharp angle itself, and likewise for their very uncomeliness, [Gothic buildings] ought to be exiled from judicious eyes, and left to their first inventors, the Goths or Lombards, amongst other relics of that barbarous age.

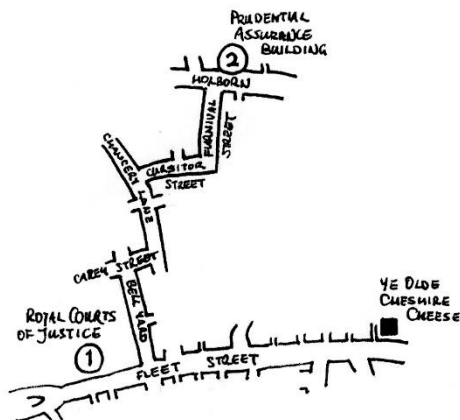
And that was the general viewpoint. But things began to change in the 1700s. It's a long and complex story, but gradually the fashion for follies and mock ruins, connected with poetry such as Grey's *Elegy in a Country Churchyard*, and linked Gothic with piety and sometimes the chivalry of the Middle Ages. Eventually people began to take Gothic architecture more seriously, to study it and work it how actually functioned.

An example of the early, rather campy incarnation of the Gothic Revival was Batty Langley's 1742 book *Gothic Architecture Improved* which gave patterns for everything from summer-houses to sideboards, and helped to inspire a flood of Gothic furniture in the homes of the wealthy. Then nearly a century later in 1836 the great architect Augustus Pugin published *Contrasts* which put fantasy Gothic versions of churches and other public buildings alongside pictures of their Classical counterparts and implied that Gothic was more Christian, more compassionate, more public-spirited. Perhaps the most extreme example is his contrasted public water-fountains. The medieval-style Gothic one is an arched conduit with kindly monks helping the poor and disabled to take the water. The modern, Classical version is a chained-up public pump where a parish watch officer beats a ragged child who's come to collect water away with a truncheon. That shows you where Pugin was coming from! He wrote:

Nothing can be regained but by a restoration of the ancient feelings and sentiments, it is they alone that can restore Gothic architecture.

So for Pugin and his followers Gothic was deeply serious; not just about building attractive buildings, but reforming society through its architecture.

From there we went to the first stop, just along the road.



## *I. The Royal Courts of Justice, The Strand, 1874-82*

The story of this immensely grand building is that of a great British cock-up. The old Law Courts in Westminster were cramped and out of place once the Palace of Westminster was rebuilt in 1836. By the 1870s Prime Minister Gladstone had reformed a great deal of how the legal system was structured, so the Liberal government wanted a new High Court building as the home for the new courts. It was always going to be a Gothic structure, because by then Gothic was associated with tradition, law, and the constitution, with 'the British way of doing things'.

The project was put out to competition, with architects invited to submit designs, and all the top-ranked architects were Gothic Revivalists. There were three institutions involved in the judging: the Royal Institute of British Architects, the lawyers, and Parliament. The architects put Charles Barry (the designer of the new Palace of Westminster) first, and George Gilbert Scott second; the lawyers went for Scott first and Alfred Waterhouse second; the Parliamentary committee insisted that George Street (who'd been an assistant to Scott) take part, and then opted for Barry, *followed* by Street. Barry promised to submit a design for a new National Gallery, which never happened in the end which is why we still have the older one.

So Street was finally appointed to run the project, but nothing went well for him. In 1874 his wife died; he married again, but his second wife was taken ill on their honeymoon, never really recovered, and was dead too a couple of years later. His bosses at the Parliamentary Committee first moved the proposed site of the Court to the Embankment, then changed its mind again. They continually demanded economies, while the building contractors went bankrupt. Finally poor Street died in 1881 after a stroke, while the scaffolding was still on the building.

But what he left was a masterpiece. The great central hall is like a cathedral. Look at the lamps! That phrase, 'the majesty of the Law' is fully realised in this building. And it's not just majestic: come past when it's lit up at night, and it's actually slightly scary.

The second stop is about ten minutes away. On the way, take note of some of the buildings along Chancery Lane, including Bream's Buildings – not very high-grade stuff, but it shows how Gothic style can be translated into a relatively cheap and mass-produced form, with lots of pointy arches and coloured brick.

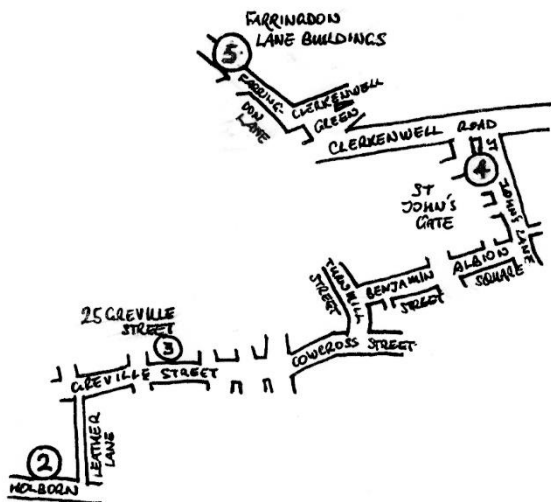
## ***II. The Prudential Assurance Offices, Holborn, 1876-9, 1885-8, 1895-1900***

For our purposes, Alfred Waterhouse, the architect of this building, is a bit of a disappointment because he neither went mad nor was hounded to his grave like poor George Street. He made his reputation in the provinces, and his first big commission was the new Town Hall at Manchester. He went on from this structure to design the Natural History Museum, which, although it's neo-Norman in *style* – not a pointed arch in the whole thing – is Gothic in *form* and detail, in the same way that really the Houses of Parliament are a Classical building in Gothic fancy dress!

The Prudential Assurance Company had its first home on Ludgate Hill just down from St Paul's Cathedral. It was the first major financial enterprise to move outside the City, and that makes this a useful place to think about the growth of London in the 1800s and what that meant for its architecture.

In 1831, the population of London was 1,760,000; by 1901, it had reached 6,580,000, nearly four times as much. It was, as the historian George Young wrote, 'the conversion of the vast and shapeless city which Dickens knew, fog-bound and fever-haunted, brooding over its dark, mysterious river, into the imperial capital'. Holborn itself was pretty built up even by the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, but as the city expanded, former suburbs and villages were engulfed within the urban area as new estates of houses, some cheap and some posh, appeared, and strings of terraced houses grew up along the roads. This huge change was all done in a very piecemeal fashion: London had no central planning authority, just the Metropolitan Board of Works, until the London County Council was set up in 1888. Lots of the most prominent of those new buildings would be Gothic ones.

The building we can see now encloses a huge courtyard now called Waterhouse Square, and it's built on the site of Furnival's Inn, one of the old Inns of Chancery, and possibly Waterhouse had that in mind when he designed something that looks like an overgrown Oxford college only in red brick. It even had a built-in chapel. It became the model for Prudential offices across the country. English Heritage is now based here too.



### III. 25 Greville Street, 1873

This is not by any stretch of the imagination a remarkable building! It was built by a jobbing company of builders called Harding & Bond for a firm of engravers, Bradbury, Wilkinson & Co. But it is a convenient place to look at the influence of another great figure of the Gothic Revival, John Ruskin.

It is perhaps unfortunate that many people now remember Ruskin more for the annulment of his marriage to Effie Gray which had never been consummated, so the gossips said, because he was traumatised on their wedding night by the sight of her pubic hair, *rather than* for his huge impact on the art and architecture of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. So many groups took up aspects of his ideas – not just the Gothic Revivalists, but the Pre-Raphaelites, Christian Socialism, Arts and Crafts movements, and the Society for the Preservation of Ancient Buildings. He was a massive influence.

His ideas on architecture were described in two books inspired by his visits to continental Europe and particularly Venice. *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* came out in 1849 and laid out a manifesto for a moral vision of what architecture should do (very Victorian in that respect), and the following year Ruskin published *The Stones of Venice* which included an essay called 'The Nature of Gothic'. Ruskin wasn't very religious, unlike many Gothic

Revivalists, but he saw Gothic as the only truly craft-based, human-scaled style of architecture, and he connected that to the society of the Middle Ages. In contrast, he wrote, Classical architecture was ‘pagan in its origin, proud and unholy in its revival, paralysed in its old age; an architecture invented to make plagiarists of its architects, slaves of its workmen, and sybarites of its inhabitants; an architecture in which intellect is idle, invention is impossible, but in which all luxury is gratified and all insolence fortified’. No, say what you think, we might be tempted to add.

The only building Ruskin actually directed the construction of was the Natural History Museum in Oxford. He didn’t design it, and he wasn’t completely satisfied with it, but it epitomised the style he approved of, sort of melded together from the medieval Gothic buildings of Venice and Bruges. It was a *disaster*, hugely overspent and racked by conflict, so it was a small miracle it was ever completed.

This relatively humble London building is still a reflection of Ruskin’s ideas. Its Gothic style is vaguely fourteenth-century, with all these repeated windows and columns in a different colour, a little tower on the side, and polychromatic brick over the arches. Eventually so much of this kind of thing was built that Ruskin despaired of his own legacy. ‘I have had indirect influence’ he wrote, ‘on nearly every cheap villa builder between here and Bromley, and there is scarcely a public-house near Crystal Palace but sells its gins and bitters under pseudo-Venetian capitals. I am leaving my own house because it is surrounded everywhere by the accursed Frankenstein monsters of my own making’.

Talking of Frankenstein monsters, we can’t incorporate into our walk one of the most extreme Victorian Gothic buildings in London. This is the Vinegar Warehouse at 33-35 Eastcheap right in the middle of the City. Robert Lewis Roumieu was the architect – we know next to nothing about him, but this building is extraordinary, bristling with spiky gables and arches and breaking all the rules of proportion. Sir Niklaus Pevsner in *The Buildings of England* described it as ‘mad’ and the critic Ian Nairn called it ‘an Edgar Allan Poe of a building. It is the scream you wake on at the end of a nightmare’. Now Nairn was well known for his polemical writing but looking at it you can sort of see what he was getting at.

#### IV. *St John's Gate, Clerkenwell, 1504*

The Gateway of the Priory of St John reminds us that underneath all the Revival stuff there was a real, genuine Gothic. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century this building became the offices of the works printing the *Gentleman's Magazine*, and then the Old Jerusalem Tavern, and it's now part of the Museum of the Order of St John, an offshoot of the medieval Knights Hospitallers.

But look towards the south. You can just about see 78 St John's Street, built as the warehouse of John Lanyon & Company, a firm of bell-founders, in 1886; so you have old and new Gothic within sight of each other, the remains of a medieval religious house and on the other hand what was in its time an up-to-date business premises. Standing at the crux of the old Gothic and the new is a figure we have already mentioned in passing – Augustus Welby Northmore Pugin.

Some aspects of Pugin's background were uncertain. Kenneth Clarke in *The Gothic Revival* says that Pugin's father was a French aristocrat, which he wasn't; who fled to England during the French Revolution, which he didn't. There was a story that, from the tower of the house Pugin built for himself in Ramsgate, The Grange, he would watch for boats being wrecked and then rush out and salvage the cargo which he would then sell, which fits in with his reckless personality but otherwise seemed far too callous to be true of him. He was once shipwrecked himself. At the age of 15 he was designing Gothic furniture for Windsor Castle which encouraged him to set up his own architectural practice at the age of 19, a venture which went down rather like a wrecked boat.

He also married at the age of 19. Pugin quite liked getting married: his first two wives sadly died, but when he married Jane Knill in 1848 he rather implied that her predecessors hadn't really been quite what he was looking for: he wrote that in Jane 'I have found myself a first-rate Gothic woman at last, who perfectly understands and delights in spires, stained glass, and vestments'. Clearly the way to any right-thinking chap's heart.

When Pugin was a child his mother had taken him to Presbyterian church services, which he hated, and as soon as he could he joined the Roman Catholic Church despite the dreadful and sometimes dangerous prejudice Catholics suffered at the time. He always connected what he believed absolutely was the only true form of Christianity with the only true form of architecture, and he saw converting England to Gothic as the same thing as

converting it to Catholicism, although as it turned out the Anglican Church would be more enthusiastic about Pugin's ideas than his own. Gilbert Scott wrote,

I was awakened from my slumbers by the thunder of Pugin's writings. I well remember the enthusiasm to which one of them excited me, one night when travelling by railway. I was from that moment a new man. What for 15 years had been for me a labour of love only, now became the one business, the one aim, the one overmastering object of my life. I cared for nothing but the revival of Gothic architecture. I did not know Pugin, but in my imagination he was like my guardian angel, and I often dreamed that I knew him.

Pugin was probably the first architect to design *everything* in one of his works, and it was as a designer that he got his most famous job – the fixtures, fittings and details of the new Palace of Westminster in 1836. Charles Barry was the architect there, but Barry knew he had no real eye for detail, and got Pugin in, rather secretly. As Kenneth Clark wrote, 'Every inch of the great building's surface, inside and out, was designed by one man; every panel, every wallpaper, every chair, sprang from Pugin's brain, and his last days were spent in designing inkpots and umbrella-stands'. I remember taking someone past the Houses of Parliament who'd never seen them in the flesh before, as it were, and they commented 'Ah, a building designed by a mad person', and there is something obsessive-compulsive about all those repeated patterns, pinnacles, arches and window-bars. It was said that Pugin couldn't resist even cutting bits of cheese into the shapes of Gothic arches. His dress imitated either a Romantic poet in a black cloak, a medieval master-mason, or a sailor in a threadbare jersey and boots. He sent a prospectus to Balliol College in Oxford with his suggestions for rebuilding the college, in the form of an illuminated medieval manuscript. They didn't take him up, but in 1850 he got the job of arranging the Medieval Hall of the Great Exhibition, which spread his ideas still further.

In the end Pugin's colossal energy and workload was his undoing. His friends urged him to employ a clerk: 'A clerk?' he said, 'I would kill him within a week'. Trying to cope with what he perceived as the idiots responsible for the Great Exhibition drove him into fits of rage; in Spring 1852 he suffered 'an attack of nervous fever' and scribbled his last design, an altar cross for the church of St Mary in Beverley, was taken to Bedlam Hospital in April, and died insane in September. He was only 40, but his doctor said he'd done enough work to fill a hundred years. Two of Pugin's sons, Edward and Peter Paul, also became Gothic architects. Peter kept up a successful career, but

Edward seemed to have inherited many of his father's more damaging traits: he maintained a punishing workload, was bankrupted designing the Granville Hotel in 1872, went mad, and was dead in 1875 at the age of 41.

Pugin's madness may have been psychological; our next architect's madness is more *narcotic*.

### *V. Farringdon Lane Buildings, 1865 & 1875*

Again, these are humble, commercial buildings, showing how Gothic Revival could affect the most ordinary structures as well as the grand and massive ones. No.33 was built by Rowland & Plumbe for a clockmaker called John Greenwood – I have no idea what the coat of arms means, possibly nothing! – while nos.109-111 was designed for a printer called William Dicks by Henry Jarvis, the District Surveyor of Southwark who also built a number of Gothic Revival churches in south London. But we're not going to talk about either of them, but about *domestic* Gothic.

There are quite a lot of Gothic houses in places such as north Oxford, but not that many in London. There's the fantastic Holly Village in Highgate, for instance; and the amazing Tower House in Kensington, home of the equally amazing William Burges. Burges designed in Gothic not because, like Pugin or Ruskin, he thought it had a moral or religious significance, but just because he liked it. Burges once wrote 'In the future, the time and cost (of a building) will be forgotten, and only the result will be looked at' – meaning that if you employed him, you had to be prepared to spend *far* more than the original quote and to wait longer for your building to be finished than he'd told you. Burges's St Finbar's Cathedral in Cork is quite sober, but Castell Coch in South Wales and Cardiff Castle are absolutely *crazy*. Every surface is decorated, an absolute riot of colour and pseudo-medieval art. He submitted a design for the new Law Courts – the competition, remember, that was won by George Street – which even at the time was called mad. All the submitted designs were pretty extreme, but Burges's was way out at left-field. It was a sort of combination of medieval Florence and Gormenghast: there was an arch spanning the whole of The Strand, hundreds of pinnacles and arches, and great soaring towers, some round, some square, and one with a huge bell swinging from the top. He designed the new Trinity College, Hartford Connecticut, but the quote, massive for the 1870s, of a million dollars, meant that only roughly one-sixth of his plan was ever built.

Tower House was, of course, smaller, but no less nuts. Burges's bedroom had a frieze of fish and eels around the walls; there were mirrored stars on the ceiling, and a mermaid carved on the chimneypiece (and then coloured, of course, nothing was left *plain*) so that Burges could indulge in one of his favourite fantasies of being at the bottom of the sea.

It is somehow no surprise to learn that William Burges was an enthusiastic user of *laudanum* – opium dissolved in alcohol of some kind. I have a friend who works as part of a group of what he would describe as *experimental archaeologists* and once – purely for the purposes of historical research – they decided to make some laudanum. Getting the opium was an interesting exercise. I think they used brandy as the alcohol base. It didn't take much for them to have, as my friend said, some very unusual dreams that night. Knowing that a high proportion of the population of Victorian Britain was regularly taking this stuff casts a particular light on the art and architecture of the time, certainly William Burges's multicoloured, phantasmagoric Gothic. He was also extremely short-sighted, which didn't help: he once mistook a peacock for a person.

Burges died in 1881 at Tower House at a mere 53, his death hastened by smoking both tobacco and opium.

After Farringdon Lane we have a long stretch of a not-especially interesting part of London, stopping, should we feel so disposed, at the Dolphin. From there we cut down a lane and find ourselves on Euston Road, opposite ...

## ***VI. The Grand Midland Hotel, 1868-77***

This incredible building, now restored to its full glory, is another symbol of developing London. Kings Cross–St Pancras Station was once an entire estate called Agar Town, which was cleared to make way for the stations and their associated buildings. A young Thomas Hardy supervised the clearing of the old St Pancras Cemetery and arranged the tombstones in the patterns which you can see there to this day.



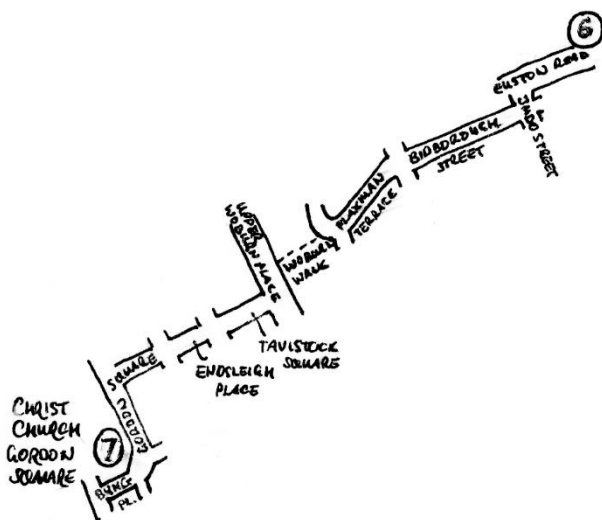
did quite well, but their father, Gilbert's son – George Gilbert Scott junior – had a far more tragic story. He was always in the shadow of his father's massive influence. He never wanted to use the Gothic style but potential clients insisted, as though he had it in his blood. He converted to Roman Catholicism, and got the commission to build what became the Catholic cathedral in Norwich – again, the Duke of Norfolk, who was paying, insisted that the building should be Gothic. Poor Scott became convinced that the ghost of his father was watching him. In 1883 he was declared insane and, like Pugin thirty years before, was taken to Bedlam Hospital. He had two more stays in asylums including one in Northampton – where his father *had designed the chapel*. There he tried to set the building on fire, and smoked cheese in his pipe. Finally he died of liver cirrhosis, so he'd effectively drunk himself to death, in a room *in the Grand Midland Hotel*.

Even then fate hadn't finished with him. Arguably his finest building, the church of St Agnes Kennington Park, was bombed in 1941. Only the roof was destroyed and there were full grants to repair it, but the Anglican Diocese of Southwark left it open to the elements, and it was demolished in 1956.

His father's Hotel, however, survived despite British Rail wanting to pull it down for years. It was only listed in 1967 after a campaign by the Victorian Society. It was railway offices until 1980, and reopened as the St Pancras Renaissance Hotel in 2011 with 68 flats on the floors above. When we actually did our Walk in 2010 it was still being finished – though not as derelict as it had been in 1988 when Douglas Adams used it as a scene in his novel *The Long Dark Tea-time of the Soul* as the real-world equivalent of Valhalla: 'a huge, dark Gothic fantasy of a building which stands, empty and desolate... its roof line a vast assortment of wild turrets, gnarled spires and pinnacles which seemed to prod at and goad the night sky'. Tidied up though it is, come here at night and squint a little, and that description doesn't seem so far off.

## ***VII. Christ Church, Gordon Square, 1853***

You might remember that we said about Pugin's early religious upbringing: his mother taking him to Presbyterian church services that he hated so much he became a Roman Catholic. Well, one of the preachers the young Pugin heard was a man called Edward Irving.



A famous Scottish Presbyterian preacher who moved to London and developed heretical opinions, Irving was excommunicated by the Church of Scotland in 1831 and set up on his own, his followers calling themselves the *Catholic Apostolic Church*. Irving himself died in 1834, but by then he had established an order of twelve 'Apostles', modelled on Jesus's, to run his Church. They quietly occupied a couple of chapels here and there until by chance one of the apostles and another Catholic Apostolic official found themselves at Mass in Rouen Cathedral in Normandy. As they watched the priest go about his work, the prophet received a miraculous message, an angel whispering in his ear the words 'These are the vestments in which the Lord would have his priests serve him'. They took this message back to London and within months had revolutionised the whole style of their Church. It had gone from being a sober-looking Nonconformist sect to its churches being filled with incense, elaborate embroidery, and plainchant singing, but oddly enough not candles – they preferred oil lamps. In 1853 they commissioned Raphael Brandon to design this amazing, cathedral-sized building as their headquarters - it is 90 feet high, only 13 feet lower than Westminster Abbey. They had, as you can guess, some seriously wealthy supporters. The Church grew very quickly, setting up congregations as far afield as Stockholm and Hamburg, which was just as well as its services became very elaborate and needed a lot of people – a full-works Irvingite High Mass required *sixty-four* participants and it is doubtful that they ever managed it.

But the Catholic Apostolic Church had a bit of a problem. Edward Irving had, during his last years, become rather obsessively interested in Biblical

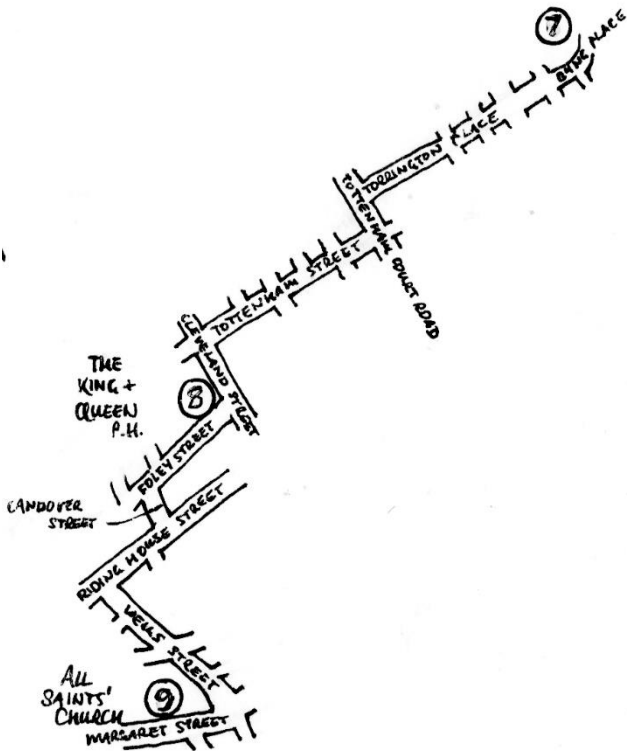
prophecy – it was one of the things that had got him into conflict with the Church of Scotland authorities – and believed that the end of the world was imminent, as people who become obsessively interested in Biblical prophecy often do. So when he set up his church, he decreed that new ministers could only be ordained by the Twelve Apostles he had established. This meant that when the original Apostles began dying off it was quite awkward. Attempts to get around the rule were very controversial and finally when the last of Mr Irving's Apostles died in 1902, that was more or less the end. There are still some Irvingites around – there is a very grand church at Albury in Surrey which I've never managed to get into and which is hardly ever used, still managed by the Church's Trustees – but they have no sacraments because they have no priests anymore. Eventually this huge building was no longer needed. The Irvingites still own it, but in 1963 it became the chapel of the University of London, and for some years now has been used on Sundays by an evangelical Anglican church plant called the Euston Church, and on weekdays by Forward in Faith, the Anglican group opposed to women being ordained. I don't think they talk to one another much.

That leads us to the architect of this amazing structure. John Raphael Rodrigues Brandon was the son of Joshua de Isaac Moses Rodrigues Brandon, and as you might guess from that name he was of Jewish ancestry although his parents had Raphael and his brother Joshua baptised as Christians. The two Brandon brothers had a successful architectural practice together and wrote several books about Gothic architecture in the 1840s; they designed stations and engine houses on the London-to-Croydon line with chimneys modelled after church bell-towers. But Joshua died in 1848 and Raphael was never the same again. He became a member of the Irvingites which was why it made sense for him to design their church, really his masterpiece, though the critics thought it was 'unoriginal'. They said the same about his submitted design for the new Law Courts, though to us it may look nearly as crackers as the other plans we've already discussed. He and his wife Harriet suffered the loss of a child in infancy and then Harriet herself died at the age of only 34, even though she was more than twenty years younger than Raphael. Thomas Hardy had worked for the Brandons in the 1840s and kept in touch with Raphael: he based the offices of a character in *A Pair of Blue Eyes* on Raphael's rooms in Clement's Inn:

First was a small anteroom, divided from the inner apartment by a wainscoted archway two or three yards wide. Across this archway hung a pair of dark-green curtains, making a mystery of all within the arch except the spasmodic scratching of a quill pen. Here was grouped a chaotic assemblage of articles — mainly old framed prints and

in this gloomy room that poor Raphael Brandon shot himself in 1877, building that he had himself designed.

⑦ NAME



There has been a pub here since at least 1793 and the name The King & Queen is first recorded in 1809, but clearly the building is much later than that. We don't know the name of the designer, and it was probably the work of a humble building firm rather than an architect as such. It shows how Gothic could be used to tart up anything, including a relatively lowly pub – even if it does end up being (as this was) the place where Bob Dylan played his first gig

outside the USA. Its multicoloured bands of stone and brick also, yet again, show the watered-down influence of John Ruskin.

It was buildings like this that prompted Ruskin's outburst: 'I would rather, for my own part, that no architects had ever condescended to adopt *one* of the views suggested in [*The Stones of Venice*], than that *any* should have made the *partial* use of it which has mottled our manufactory chimneys with black and red brick, dignified our banks and draper's stores with Venetian tracery, and pinched our parish churches into dark and slippery arrangements for the advertisement of cheap coloured glass and pantiles'. He was, as we've already noted, very unhappy about it.

In 1874 Ruskin was awarded the Gold Medal of the Royal Institute of British Architects, while George Gilbert Scott was RIBA's President. He refused the honour, asking angrily what the Institute had done to stop the destruction of four important old buildings across Europe, knowing full well that as far as Britain was concerned, its members had in fact been responsible for pulling real Gothic buildings down, and replacing them with fantasies. And it wasn't just in Britain, either: Gothic Revival spread across the world, resulting in weird Gothic churches and railway stations in India, or the inventions of Eugene Viollet-le-Duc in France, who built *chateaux* and churches based on the illustrations in medieval manuscripts – and even designed Gothic-themed railway carriages for Emperor Napoleon III.

### *IX. All Saints' Church, Margaret Street, 1850-59*

The great campaigners for the restoration of churches in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Cambridge Camden Society – popularly known as the Ecclesiologists – wanted their own church, something to showcase their ideals. The commission was demanding. The building must be in the style of 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup>-century Gothic; its 'ornament should decorate its construction', so nothing unnecessary should be present, which was one of Pugin's key principles; it should be honestly and solidly built; and its architect should be 'a single, pious and laborious artist alone, pondering deeply over his duty to do his best for God's holy religion'. That begs a lot of questions, not least the sex of the architect – although female designers were vanishingly few. In fact, the only one I know about is Sophy Gray, wife of the Anglican Bishop of Cape Colony, who designed fifty Gothic churches across South Africa in the 1850s and 60s, and not even I'd heard of *her* until a couple of years ago.

The architect the Ecclesiologists eventually settled on was William Butterfield, a relatively young man at 30, who was a strange, monkish character. After a series of quarrels with friends he became a virtual recluse and, when he was awarded the RIBA Gold Medal, unlike Ruskin he accepted it, but didn't turn up to receive it. His other great buildings include Keble College in Oxford, where the polychrome is so brash you almost need sunglasses to live in it, Melbourne Cathedral in Australia, and Perth Cathedral, not in Australia but the one in Scotland.

The site on Margaret Street that Butterfield was asked to work with was an awkward one. Not only was it in 'an area of dirty shops and dingy private dwellings where children never washed', but it was a plot of a hundred feet square onto which Butterfield had to cram not only a church but also a hall, a vicarage, and a choir school. He solved the problem in two ways. First, he brought the long chancel, the east end of the church, the Ecclesiologists demanded westwards into the church itself, squeezing the whole building into a shorter footprint; secondly, he built upwards, five storeys counting the attics. The idea for the banded stone was probably borrowed from Siena Cathedral, but Siena Cathedral isn't built of red brick, so although All Saints' may be in medieval Gothic style, no medieval building ever looked *remotely* like this. And inside it's even more amazing, every surface sumptuously decorated.

By the 1880s Gothic was beginning to fall out of fashion, except for churches; people continued to have a general idea that church buildings – whether Anglican, Roman Catholic, Methodist, Presbyterian, or whatever – *ought* to have pointy windows and arches, or they weren't proper churches. And today Gothic has all but vanished from the repertoire of architects, except for oddities like Minster Court in the City, built by GMW in 1991. That's in what has been described as 'postmodern Gothic' and although it doesn't really feature arched windows in the way Pugin would recognise, it does have spikes, pinnacles, and jagged angles and gables. In 1996 it featured in the live-action movie of *101 Dalmatians* as the outside of Cruella deVil's fashion house, and you can't get more Goth than that.

I finish with some words from the writer Gavin Young, who has also tackled – or at least noticed – the question of whether architects were drawn to Gothic because of some melancholy or extremity in their character, or whether those who built in Gothic were *driven* mad *by* their buildings. Gavin Young wrote:

The life of a Victorian architect was not without its tensions. Pugin and his son both died mad, as did Sir Gilbert Scott's son. Others took to the bottle and a few committed suicide. There was so much passion in that complex, intense, tortured, pious age. Fortunately, a great deal of that passion went into its architecture.



*At All Saints' Margaret Street – photo by  
Mrs Pacanowski*



*Photo by Mr Carter*

### 3. Walk 23 – Down the Well: Spas, Springs, and Sacred Waters, 14 May 2011

This Walk also arose from a pre-existing interest of mine in holy and ancient springs. In 1995 I was lucky enough to have the opportunity to write *The Living Stream*, really the first book that laid out the real history of the phenomenon of the holy well, and I also published a series of booklets and articles about wells in the places I've lived. I decided to try to put together a Walk on this subject too. The big problem I faced was that hardly any wells and springs actually survive in central London. There *are* a couple, and in fact one that I thought had vanished *probably* just about survives, but you have to look hard. For the rest, you just have to use your imagination!

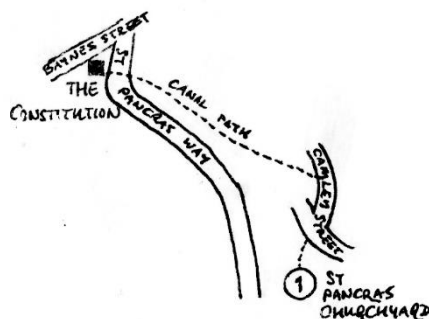
It was a bright Spring day and we gathered at the Constitution in St Pancras which, as I write in 2022, has been closed for a couple of years but is due to reopen, before moving to a convenient space nearby to introduce the subject.

Picture if you will a rain-lashed North Welsh seaside town. Just below the promenade on a scrap of grass is an ancient chapel, and under the tiny altar is a spring beneath the floor. This is the Well of St Trillo who, legend says, was a hermit in the area of what's now Colwyn Bay in the 6<sup>th</sup> century, and it was my introduction to the strange world of holy wells. Over the years I have dragged my family and friends to find them in out-of-the-way or unexpectedly commonplace corners of the world. Some are very grand, like the Gothic well-house AWN Pugin built over the Bonville Spring for Lord Middleton at Witley in Surrey in the 1840s; and some are just holes in the ground. My friend Dr Bones maintains that a *proper* holy well has to have a crisp packet floating in the water because that was what we found at the first one I took her to see.

This is not the place for a history of holy wells as it's too complicated! But to summarise: water is 'good for you', but some water sources are better than others, whether because of some chemical quality in them, or because of their associations with a saint, spirit, or sacred site. Then there's the feeling that some springs, pools and wells are gateways to other worlds – and, in a way, all bodies of water can be that. There was an old assumption that all holy wells were originally pagan places what were then converted to Christian usage, the old gods becoming saints and so on. There are very few places where you can *prove* this happened, and different eras and cultures and religious traditions were very capable of creating new wells and new names for them. After the Middle Ages when educated people became a bit embarrassed at the ideas of saints and miraculous cures, healing waters were rebranded as spas, adding another layer to the traditions and concepts.

As well as holy wells and healing wells, there are cursing wells, rag wells, predictive wells, and wells that do all sorts of things. At a well called Peter Dodd's at Westhoughton in Lancashire you can drop a piece of paper on the grille over the water and if it gets sucked down the weather will be fine, but if it's blown back up it'll be wet. The water of St Teilo's Well at Maenchlochog in Wales will cure the whooping cough, but only if you drink it from the saint's skull which is kept nearby. The most active holy wells in Britain today are probably the Christian wells at Holywell in North Wales and Walsingham in Norfolk, and the pagan Chalice Well in Glastonbury, all of which are visited by thousands of people every year.

For our first stop, we went down the canal path to St Pancras's Churchyard.



### *I. Old St Pancras's Churchyard*

The churchyard here deserves a look in its own right. You will find the tomb of Sir John Soane, used by Gilbert Scott as the basis for the design of the red phone box; the graves of John Polidori, of William Godwin, and of Mary Wollstonecraft. When the railway went through here in the 1860s, Thomas Hardy was responsible for the clearing work, and decided to pile the gravestones up around a tree, which collapsed at the end of 2022.

Old St Pancras's is, some argue, the oldest site of Christian worship in London – its dedication to the Roman martyr Pancras is very rare, and usually early. So was St Pancras's Wells here ancient, too? In fact it's hard to tell for sure.

Other holy wells in London included St Clement's Well at Clement's Inn, and St Bride's Well in Fleet Street, which gave its name to the Bridewell prison – not just the one nearby, but Bridewells up and down the country. Then there was St Peter's Well at Westminster: the legend went that St Peter had actually come to Roman Londinium and a fisherman had ferried him across the

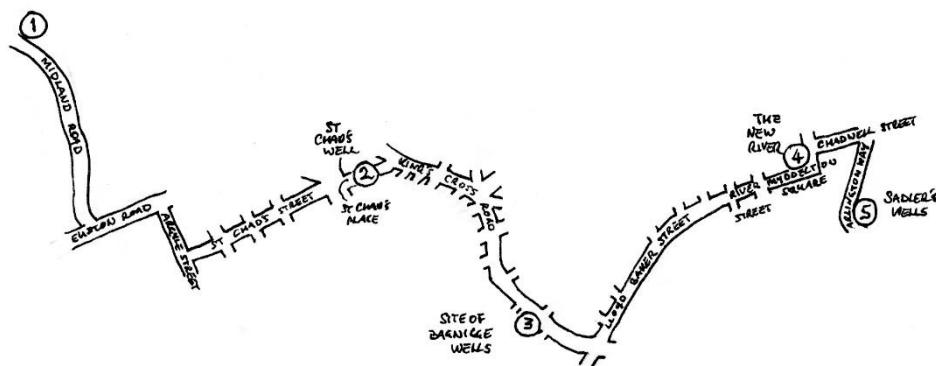
marshes to Thorney Island, where he had planted his staff and where the Abbey of Westminster was eventually built.

As for St Pancras's Wells, we know little about them until 1697 when the virtues of their waters was promoted by the pub next door to the church. It was a similar story in Southwark where the pub that became known as the George in about 1730, when it began encouraging people to take the waters at St George's Spaw, *had* been called the Dog & Duck! Anyway, St Pancras's Wells were said to be 'a powerful antidote against the rising of the vapours' (whatever they were), and cured 'the most obstinate cases of scurvy, king's-evil, and leprosy, and all other breakings out of the skin'. In 1769 one writer described the place:

St Pancras Wells Waters are in the greatest perfection, and highly recommended by the most eminent physicians in the kingdom ... the house and gardens of which are genteel and rural as any round this metropolis; the best of tea, coffee, and hot loaves, every day, may always be depended on, with neat wines, curious punch, Dorchester, Marlborough, and Ringwood beers; Burton, Yorkshire, and other fine ales, and cider; and also cows kept to accommodate ladies and gentlemen with new milk and cream, and syllabubs in the greatest perfection.

In common with a lot of spas, St Pancras was fading in popularity by the 1800s, and by 1825 the site was just a stone tub in a house garden. Finally it was swept away when the railway went through in the 1860s.

At our next stop, again, there's not much to see in terms of a well – but perhaps not *quite* nothing.



## II. *St Chad's Place, Kings Cross*

This alleyway may not look much, but it is the site of St Chad's Well, Battle Bridge, one of the most famous healing springs near the capital in its day. It was far from being the only one, and across the country, of course, there were hundreds of others. Crowder's Well at St Giles's Church, Cripplegate, was used for sore eyes, tasted of milk, and could even sober up drunks, though I suppose most water can if they consume enough of it. In the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries the most promoted property of medicinal springs seems to have been their ability to purge, which makes you wonder why people at the time were always constipated. That was the case with the spa at Streatham, whose purgative abilities were discovered by a gang of thirsty weed-diggers rather dramatically, and a similar fate befell a man who merely *stood* in what became the spa at Oxshott in Surrey.

The *legend* related to St Chad's Well is that it sprang out of the ground at the foot of the Anglo-Saxon King Edmund Ironside during his defeat of the Danes, but many wells later named after the 7<sup>th</sup>-century bishop St Chad in fact come from an Anglo-Saxon word meaning 'cold'. The healing powers of this one are first mentioned in 1762; another advert ten years later says that the well has just been reopened and a thousand people attended the event to take the waters. St Chad's Well had about forty years of popularity and then began to go out of fashion. In 1825 the journalist William Hone came here and reported: 'Entering by a pair of elderly wooden gates, a scene opens which the unaccustomed eye may take for the pleasure ground of Giant Despair'. He noted that there was an old woman selling the water to visitors, and a triangular pediment over the gate with the name, 'St Chad's Wells'. The entrance fee was pretty steep at sixpence, though you could pay for weekly, monthly, or quarterly rates. The well-house contained an oil painting supposedly of St Chad but which Hone thought more like 'some opulent butcher who flourished in the reign of Queen Anne'. The well, he said, was by then 'scarcely known in the neighbourhood – St Chad's Well is haunted, not frequented'. When the railway went through in 1860, everything was destroyed, as with St Pancras's Wells not far away.

Or was it? Since we took the Walk, holy well researchers have pointed out that in the middle of the alleyway is a small iron grille which differs from the usual drain covers. All you can usually see down those is stagnant water or a clogged-up drain a couple of feet below the surface, but beneath *this* one, a long way down – possibly thirty feet, at an earlier ground level – is running water, so there is clearly a spring somewhere close by. Could this be all that remains of St Chad's Well, just clinging to existence?

### *III. Bagnigge House – Bagnigge Wells*

The smiling face on the wall of a row of houses in Kings Cross Road and its plaque is all that remains of Bagnigge House. Some say Nell Gwyn lived here, but she lived in all sorts of places if you believe the stories. What we do know is that Bagnigge House stood here when this area was mainly empty fields, when the Fleet River ran just yards away behind these buildings, and when this stretch of what is *now* Kings Cross Road was known by the picturesque name of Black Mary's Hole. There were two springs, Black Mary's Hole itself, and one called the Redwell in the late 1500s. There are several explanations of the name – some say the 'Black Maries' were the nuns of Clerkenwell Convent not far away, but most accounts refer to a woman of African heritage called Mary Wollaston who looked after the conduit here and sold the water in the later 1600s.

So that's the name. The spa here, Bagnigge Wells, was opened about 1760 by an entrepreneurial gentleman called Thomas Hughes who'd bought the land a few years before and had the waters of the springs tested. He spent quite a bit of money on the scheme, laying out pleasure gardens where the good souls of London could promenade. The waters were drawn to two pumps in a circular colonnade grandly called a temple. There was a grotto stuck with glass and shells, a bowling green, a skittle alley, and a tea room. The decoration was supposed to call to mind a kind of rural idyll: there were statues of a boy and a swan, a man with a scythe and a woman with a rake. The pub a few yards away had been called The Fox At Bay and had a reputation as 'a resort of footpads and highwaymen', yet by 1775 it had been renamed 'The Royal Bagnigge Wells' (rather like Royal Tunbridge Wells!), and artists were producing satirical prints poking fun at the crowds who came, 'quizzing one another and being ogled in turn'. A poem of 1760 advertising the site ran:

... There stands a dome superb,  
Dight *Bagnigge*; where, from our forefathers hid,  
Long have two springs in dull stagnation slept;  
But, taught at length by subtle art to flow,  
They rise, forth from oblivion's bed they rise,  
And manifest their virtues to mankind.

Bagnigge Wells flourished until about 1815, when it was covered up and eventually, and humiliatingly, converted into a cesspool. A new pump was put over the spring in 1826, but stolen the same year, and finally the whole place disappeared, leaving nothing but this plaque.

But as well as healing waters and sacred waters, people also need water just to drink, and that is dealt with at our next stop.

#### *IV. The New River Head*

As London grew, it simply didn't have enough fresh water to supply its population. There are many street names that refer to wells, springs, and other water sources, but they were, eventually, too haphazard and too few to make up the difference – to say nothing about the risk of wells and pumps being polluted, which would of course lead to the great cholera epidemic of 1854. Something had to be done, even by the early 1600s.

So, far to the north of London are two springs. The Chadwell in Hertford is another of the wells named after St Chad, possibly! and had a reputation for curing sore eyes. In about 1220 it was given to the canons of Waltham Abbey with instructions to improve the water supply to the area, which happened in a number of places around that time. A few miles to the east of Hertford and the Chadwell is a village called Amwell, and that's mentioned in Domesday Book. It's named after a powerful spring supposedly bearing the name of Amma, the wife of King Canute. In 1613 a Welsh-born mine-owner, goldsmith, banker, and self-taught engineer called Hugh Myddleton tapped both the Chadwell and the Amwell and channelled their water into what became called the New River. It flowed all the way to this spot following the 100ft contour line, fed by nothing more than gravity (though later centuries would add pumps to keep the water flowing). The New River was an engineering triumph, and it still delivers water to the London ring main.

Not all London's old water-sources were straightforward. There's a reason why a pool in Old Street, right on the edge of the City, was called Perilous Pond – John Stow, writing in 1611, said that it took the life of anyone who swam in it, although by 1743 a jeweller called Mr Kemp found he got great relief from headaches by taking its waters and opened a 'pleasure bath' there with, as far as we can tell, no fatal consequences.

#### *V. Sadlers Wells*

Mr Richard Sadler was Surveyor of Highways in Clerkenwell. In 1683 two men digging in his garden – at his instructions, they weren't just random delvers – discovered what they initially thought was buried treasure but which turned out to be the surround of a well. The water was rich in iron: Mr Sadler saw a bit of an opportunity and got a Dr Thomas Guidot from Bath to test and publicise the virtues of the well against 'dropsy, jaundice, scurvy, green sickness and other distempers to which females are liable—ulcers, fits of the mother, virgin's fever and hypochondriacal distemper'. This was canny marketing – the well cured sicknesses specific both to men and women, not all

of them being entirely real, so you couldn't really tell when you're cured and had to keep coming back! Mr Sadler opened a music-room which became only the second public theatre established after the Restoration, to provide entertainment for visitors to what he *claimed* was a medieval holy well, but which probably wasn't.

In 1733 'The Wells' was so fashionable that the Princesses Amelia and Caroline came daily to the gardens in June that year, encouraging every person in London who wanted to be *seen* as fashionable to turn up too. According to Walter Thornbury in *Old London* 'Feathers flaunted, silks rustled, fans fluttered, and lovers sighed, partly with nausea and partly with love, as they sipped the bitter waters of Æsculapius. On the birthday of one of the princesses, the ladies were saluted as they passed through Spa Fields (then full of carriages) by a discharge of twenty-one guns, a compliment always paid to them on their arrival, and in the evening there was a great bonfire, and more powder was burnt in their honour. On ceasing to visit the gardens, the Princess Amelia presented the master with twenty-five guineas, each of the water-servers with three guineas, and the other attendants with one guinea each'. But the Stuart satirist Ned Ward was less enamoured with Sadlers Wells: in the pit, he says, were 'butchers, bailiffs, housebreakers, footpads, prizefighters, thief-takers, deerstealers, and bullies, who drank, and smoked, and lied, and swore'. As the water of the well was used for brew beer for the theatregoers, this was no surprise!

In 1811, if you came to visit The Wells, you would still have found a lodginghouse for visitors, a breakfast room, an orchestra playing for your entertainment, and that most Gothick of all accoutrements, a Grotto, but gradually the theatre began to be an attraction in its own right and the well moved into the background. It was, however, preserved, and so, unusually for the wells mentioned on our Walk, you can still see it, just off the entrance area and free to visit whenever the theatre is open. It's used in the theatre's air-conditioning system, and the excess is sold on to Thames Water, so it's still very much playing a role in serving the people of London.

## *VI. Spa Fields, Clerkenwell*

There were so many notable springs in this part of London! The Cold Bath in Coldbath Square was discovered in 1697, and supposedly it 'prevents and cures cold, creates appetite, helps digestion, and makes hardy the tenderest constitution' – that is, it did you good! That remained until 1865 before being covered over. Islington Spa – or 'the New Tunbridge Wells' – was found in the 1680s and not covered over until 1946. London Spa was found in 1685 and

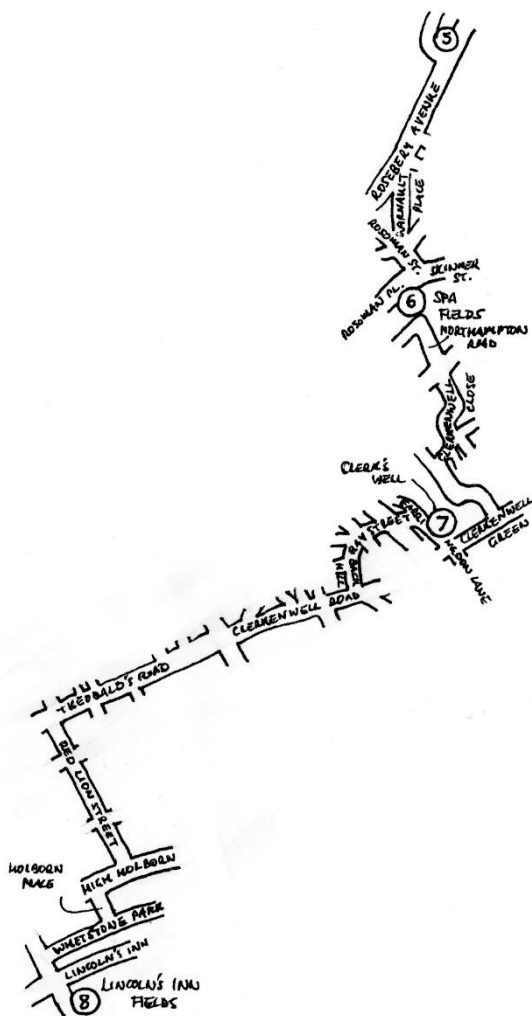
dried up in the early 1800s. All these healing springs and spas were around this area.

Other things went on here too – it wasn't necessarily a salubrious and fashionable place. On the edge of this open space was Coldbath Prison, so notorious that Coleridge and Southey wrote:

*As he went through Coldbath Fields he saw  
A solitary cell:  
And the Devil was pleased, for it gave him a hint  
For improving his prisons in Hell.*

The historian of Clerkenwell, William Pinks, wrote in 1865 that

In former times the district around the chapel known as Spa Fields, or the Ducking-pond Fields, now intersected by streets of well-built houses, was the summer's evening resort of the townspeople, who came hither to witness the rude sports that were in vogue a century ago, such as duck-hunting, prize-fighting, bull-baiting, and others of an equally demoralising character. We are informed by an old newspaper that in 1768 'Two women fought for a new



shift, valued at half-a-crown, in the Spaw Fields, near Islington. The battle was won by a woman called 'Bruising Peg', who beat her antagonist in a terrible manner'. In the summer of the same year 'an extraordinary battle was fought in the Spa Fields by two women against two tailors, for a guinea a head, which was won by the ladies, who beat the tailors in a severe manner'. On Saturday, the 28th August, 1779, a scene of fun and business intermixed took place in Spa Fields, to which no language can do justice. Bills had been stuck up and otherwise circulated, that an ox would be roasted whole, and beer given to the friends of their king and country, who were invited to enlist; that two gold-laced hats should be the reward of the two best cudgel-players; that a gown, a shift, and a pair of shoes and stockings should be run for by four old women; and that three pounds of tobacco, three bottles of gin, and a silver-laced hat, should be *grinned* for by three old men, the frightfullest grinner to be the winner.

And people complain about *Britain's Got Talent* ...

Spa Fields Chapel, on the site of what is now the Anglican church of Holy Redeemer, opened as The Pantheon, a 'place of amusement', in 1770 – and which went bankrupt in 1774. The Methodist Countess Selina of Huntingdon then bought the building and opened it as a chapel in 1777 despite the opposition of the Vicar of Clerkenwell who didn't want to lose the pew rents left by people abandoning his church for a new place of worship. Soon after this, some speculators bought two acres of land to the rear of Spa Fields to be used as a burying ground. They estimated there was room for not quite 3000 bodies – but over the next 50 years some 80,000 were buried here. The overcrowding was dreadful and there were reports of bodies being exhumed a couple of days after the funeral, chopped up and burned, and the coffins being reused; headstones appeared as paving slabs in other parts of London. Eventually the cemetery was closed in 1844. Holy wells are often found near churches – and so are the dead.

### *VII. Clerk's Well, Clerkenwell*

This whole area was the site of the great nunnery of Clerkenwell, but this spring was being called the *Fons Clericorum* – the well of the clerks, or clergy – as early as 1145 *before* the convent was founded. On Ralph Aga's map of London from about 1570 it shows the spring flowing out of the wall of the old convent buildings into a tank. It seems to have moved about a bit. The area was 'a delightful place of meadowland interspersed with flowing streams' until the growth of London covered it in buildings in the mid-1700s. The well was

the focus of ‘mystery’ plays on the feast of Corpus Christi so it was an important spot in the life of the community of Clerkenwell in the middle ages.

You may remember William Hone and his visit to St Chad’s Well at Kings Cross in 1825; a couple of years earlier he found that hardly anyone paid any attention to Clerk’s Well either:

On the north side is an earthenware shop and on the south side a humble tenement inhabited by a bird seller, whose cages with their chirping tenants hand over the inscription. The passing admirer of linnets and redpoles now and then stops awhile to listen to the melody, while the monument denoting the historic fame of the place remains unobserved.

The well was final closed in 1857, but in 1924 it was rediscovered and preserved as a historical relic. As you can see it’s now owned by Islington Local History Society but although you can just about glimpse the well behind the window it’s very hard to gain access to it!

### ***VIII.    Lincolns Inn Fields***

In 1872 the match manufacturers Bryant & May celebrated the defeat of the proposed Match Tax in Parliament by opening a great Gothic water fountain for the benefit of the public. The Lord Mayor attended, the Band of the Honourable Artillery Company played, and the Rector of Bow blessed the new monument. This is not it! *It* was in Bow Road. But this one is *similar*. It’s no coincidence that William Bryant himself was a teetotaler, and so his water-fountain somewhat represented the promotion of water over alcohol: campaigners were aware that people often drank alcohol because their local wells weren’t safe, so the provision of clean water had, for them, a moral element.

*This* fountain was paid for by an anonymous lady donor, who gave it to the Metropolitan Water Fountain and Drinking Trough Association, which organised hundreds of this sort of structure across Victorian London. It’s not a holy well, of course, but a *sort of* holy well was built not long before it – that was St Govor’s Well in Kensington Gardens, set up in 1850 by Sir Benjamin Hall, the first Commissioner of Public Works to have charge of new public buildings in London. It was named after a genuine ancient holy well on his estate in Wales, where the Dark Age hermit saint Govor had lived in a little chapel on the Pembrokeshire coast; so it was completely new and nothing

more than a public fountain, yet very soon an old lady could be found selling the water to visitors, just as though it was a real holy well or healing spring.

And, strangely enough, holy wells of various sorts continue to be created today. A devout Roman Catholic lady called Nora Arthurs became known as the Seer of Canvey Island in the 1990s after a series of visionary conversations with Christ and the Virgin Mary: she once saw Jesus manifest in her kitchen sink while the tap was running, and that became a source of ‘holy water’ until Mrs Arthurs uncovered a well in her back garden to replace it. Over on the Isle of Sheppey in Kent in the mid-90s an amateur archaeologist, Brian Slade became convinced that he had found an ancient pagan holy site he called ‘the Well of the Triple Goddess’ who he identified as a fertility deity. A team of archaeologists came to excavate the well, which was genuinely medieval. It was said that one of the group had been trying unsuccessfully for a child with his wife for some years; after merely standing in the well-water, he went home and Mrs Archaeologist promptly fell pregnant, an event which Mr Slade ascribed unhesitatingly to the power of the Triple Goddess. It was in the *Daily Mail* so it must be true.

We need water. But we also thirst for something more – for mystery, for romanticism, for something which links us to the past and to the natural world. Sometimes, we find those things by gazing down a well.



*The walkers pause in the not-obviously-historic surroundings of St Chad's Place –  
photo by Ms Jensen*

## 4. Walk 25 – The Cock Lane Ghost, 22 October 2011

The Cock Lane Ghost walk was the first I did (and the only one, to date) which told the story of a specific incident. I've always been interested in the boundaries between belief, folklore, rumour and what you might call urban legend. The Cock Lane Ghost tale came along at just the right moment to be grabbed and celebrated by the developing popular press; without the newspapers, it would never have become the *cause célèbre* it did. I also came to realise how it affected the details, and overall trajectory, of such supernatural cases in the centuries afterwards: who would have thought that 'knock once for yes, twice for no' came from this event?

We gathered, appropriately, at the Slaughtered Lamb in Smithfield, and then found a suitable clear space just round the corner for the introduction.

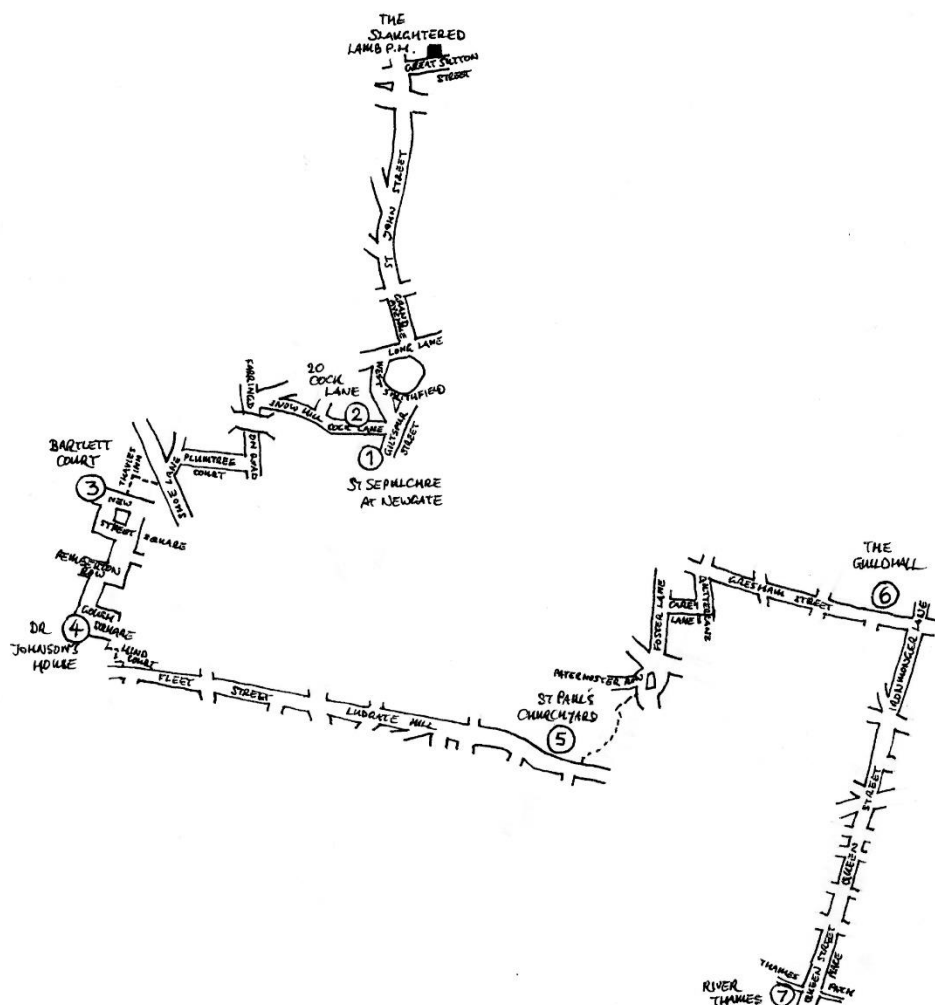
Imagine yourselves into the London of the 1750s. Just south of here is Smithfield with its meat market; it's a warren of narrow streets and lanes, and not the most salubrious part of the capital, but prosperous nonetheless because of the trade. Bartholomew Fair is a great annual occasion hereabouts; during the Fair, in 1688, the great Puritan writer John Bunyan died at the very end of Cock Lane. At the end of the street, the Fat Boy of Pye Corner supposedly commemorates the greed of the City and its role in the Great Fire of 1666.

It was an age of enlightenment, of science and industry, but also of superstition and religious fervour. The great religious movement of the day was Methodism: John Wesley, its founder, had grown up in Epworth where his father was rector, in a house haunted by 'Old Jeffrey' who caused the family no end of stress in the years 1715 and 1716. 'I will never flee from the Devil', John Wesley declared in later life, 'let the Devil flee from me!' He had been hardened to the supernatural by his early experience. It's an age, too, when people want entertainment; and in the Cock Lane Ghost, they get it.

### *I. St Sepulchre's Church, Newgate*

One Sunday morning in the summer of 1759, the Parish Clerk of St Sepulchre's Church, Richard Parsons, notices two new members of the congregation. They are a young couple, William and Fanny Kent. They tell him they have not long since arrived in London, and have left their lodgings near the Mansion House after falling out with their landlord. So Mr Parsons

invites them to come and stay in his house, not far away in Cock Lane, where he lives with his wife and two daughters.



However, little does he know that the Kents are not what they seem: for a start, they aren't married at all. Little do *they* know that he is not the respectable tradesman and official of the parish that he seems, either: he's a drunk and constantly short of money. Before long, he gets their story out of them. William Kent began as a small-scale moneylender in Norfolk, and then, about the year 1756, married Elizabeth Lynes, the daughter of a well-to-do grocer from Lyneham. They kept an inn and post office in that village.

Elizabeth fell pregnant and in the later stages her sister Frances or Fanny moved in to help. Sadly Elizabeth died giving birth to a boy, who also died a few days later, a tragic but not uncommon event at the time. Fanny stayed on and eventually began a relationship with her brother-in-law. William travelled to London to consult a lawyer in Greenwich called Richard Browne who told him that as Elizabeth had had a child, canon law ruled out them marrying. William stayed in the capital, intending to forget about Fanny, but she wrote to him and eventually they reunited and began living as a married couple, Fanny taking William's surname.

Richard Parsons seemed very sympathetic to the young couple's plight, whereas understandably Fanny's family was not happy at all. Money cements a relationship more than anything else and William lent Richard twelve guineas, not a small sum. It was while William was away at a friend's wedding that the *noises* started ...

## II. 20 Cock Lane

This is the site of Richard Parsons's house, not that there is much to see today although the old fabric *may* survive behind the new buildings. The Parsons's house was a three-storey building with one room on each floor.

The Kents had taken a liking to Elizabeth, the Parsons's elder daughter, who was about 11, and she was sleeping in Fanny's bed while William was away. It was at this time that the woman and the girl began to complain of hearing scratching and rapping noises. Mrs Parsons argued that it must be the cobbler at work next door – but he wouldn't have been working on a Sunday, and the noises carried on uninterrupted over the Sabbath. The Parsons were friends with James Franzen, landlord of the Wheatsheaf pub a few doors down. He came to visit no.20 and fled after, he said, seeing a white figure ascend the stairs. Richard Parsons came round to the pub to assure Mr Franzen that he, too, had seen the same thing.

By this stage Fanny, pregnant as her sister had been, is just weeks away from giving birth. She and William are planning to move out of Cock Lane to Bartletts Court, but their new lodging isn't ready, so instead they move nearby. Then, on January 25<sup>th</sup> 1757, Fanny falls ill. The doctor called in insists she be moved so she is taken to Bartletts Court, and there the doctor and an apothecary he has brought in to help agrees that Fanny has *smallpox*. This is terrible news. She begins to fade. She checks her will, and is attended by Revd Stephen Aldrich, the Vicar of St John's Clerkenwell. On the 2nd of February, Candlemas Day, Fanny dies.

Fanny's family, the Lyneses, are furious. Naturally William would rather they weren't around at all, but Fanny's surviving sister Anne comes to the funeral as she lives in Pall Mall. In her will, Fanny leaves her siblings half-a-crown each and the rest of her estate – which, at £245, is not a massive amount but still worth taking note of – to William. Even if they aren't married, this is still her legal right. However, things are about to turn nasty.

William refuses to honour a debt payable under the will of Thomas Lynes, Fanny's father, and the Lynes sue him in the Court of Chancery. The case doesn't come to court until October 1761, over 18 months since Fanny died; by that time William has married again, and is working as a stockbroker. Everyone's forgotten about the weird noises that Fanny and Elizabeth Parsons claimed to have heard, or the spectral being James Franzen had seen on the stairs at no.20. But they are about to remember.

### *III. Bartletts Court*

This is the site of the Kents' lodging after they left Cock Lane, but obviously the whole area has changed.

You may recall William Kent lending Richard Parsons the sum of twelve guineas. Over two years later, about a quarter of that remained to be repaid, and so William instructed his solicitor to take his former landlord to court. By January 1762 the debt had been recovered, but things were about to move forward.

One of the Parsons's lodgers left 20 Cock Lane that winter, disturbed by strange noises that afflicted the house at night; they seemed to focus on the now-13-year-old Elizabeth Parsons, always beginning late at night when she was in bed. Richard had the wainscoting around her bed removed, but found nothing. He decided to consult Revd John Moore, the Rector of St Bartholomew's Smithfield. It may seem odd that he went to Revd Moore and not to his own incumbent, the vicar of St Sepulchre-at-Newgate, but Moore, a young clergyman of 27, was sympathetic to Methodism – and, perhaps, to the idea of ghosts.

Parsons and Revd Moore concluded that this was a new ghost, not the same one that had made itself known two years before. *This was Fanny Kent*. And ghosts, said Revd Moore, often have a message to transmit. What could poor, lost Fanny want to tell the world? Richard Parsons told Revd Moore about William Kent's lawsuit, and all the circumstances of the Kents. They decided that the first ghost, the figure that terrified James Franzen on the stairs at

no.20, was Elizabeth Lynes come to warn her sister of her impending death. They noted that Ann Lynes had complained at the funeral service that the coffin lid was already screwed down so she could not inspect her sister's corpse – why would this have been done? Could it be because her body *showed no sign of smallpox*?

But how were the living to communicate with the dead? How do ghosts communicate at séances? That whole business of 'knock once for yes, twice for no' begins *here*; that was the way Revd Moore and Richard Parsons worked out to divine the message of *their* ghost, and it has carried on ever since. Gradually they became convinced not only was the ghost Fanny Kent, but that she had died not from smallpox, but from *arsenic poisoning*. On January 5<sup>th</sup> Revd Moore brought in his colleague Thomas Broughton, another clergyman of Methodist convictions, who came away convinced that the ghost was real.

The story of the ghost appeared in London's newest daily newspaper, the *Public Ledger* ('open to all parties, influenced by none', its motto declared). William Kent was horrified, and insisted on attending one of the Revd Moore's séances to see for himself what was happening. These were quickly developing into a ritual. First, Elizabeth Parsons got into her nightclothes, and went to bed while the audience stood around the room and asked questions of the ghost. Richard Parsons would always warn them that the spirits were 'sensitive to disbelief' before his cousin Mary invoked the ghost – so the whole family was involved by this stage. On the first occasion William Kent turned up – January 12<sup>th</sup> – Revd Moore told the people they were too noisy, and should go downstairs while he would contact the ghost and ask their questions for them. Are you the wife of Mr Kent? he asked (one rap). Did you die naturally? (two). By poison? (one). Someone called out to William to ask if he was going to end up hanged and there was *one rap* in response. 'You are a lying spirit and not the ghost of my Fanny!' shouted William, and rushed out of the house.

By late January there were séances every couple of days. Elizabeth was moved around from house to house, and the phenomena followed her, but the ghost was very erratic, appearing now at different times or not at all. If candles were lit in the dark, or people stood too close to the bed, the Parsons family stopped the proceedings. Suspicions were raised, but nothing could be proved.

The Cock Lane Ghost is about to drag in one of literary London's most famous figures: Dr Johnson's House is just around the corner.

#### *IV. Dr Johnson's House*

This is *not* where Samuel Johnson was living at the time of the Cock Lane scandal, but he *was* involved so it's not inappropriate to come here.

By the end of January 1762 the ghost had become a sensation. Hundreds of people hung around in Cock Lane hoping to get into the house, and Richard Parsons was charging an entrance fee. The newspapers were taking sides; the clergy were taking sides too, and Horace Walpole sniffed that it was all being stirred up by the Methodists (that didn't stop him coming). Revd Aldrich of Clerkenwell, who'd seen Fanny just before she died, emerged as a sceptic. Then, on the 26<sup>th</sup>, Richard Parsons placed this advert in the *Public Ledger*:

Whereas several advertisements have appeared in the papers reflecting upon my character, who am father of the child which now engrosses the talk of the town; I do hereby declare publicly, that I have always been willing and am now ready to deliver up my child for trial into the hands of any number of candid and reasonable men, requiring only such security for a fair and gentle treatment of my child, as no father of children or man of candour would refuse.

Fanny's body had been laid to rest in the crypt at Clerkenwell Parish Church. Mr Aldrich, whose church it was, organised his own committee of investigation on behalf of the Lord Mayor. He included Lord Dartmouth, vice-president of the Foundling Hospital; Mrs Smith, hospital matron; Dr George Macaulay, physician; Captain George Wilkinson, army officer; Revd James Penn, schoolmaster; Revd John Douglas, later Bishop of Salisbury; and the Revd Moore, the ghost's main supporter. But dominating the committee was scholar and author Samuel Johnson.

Johnson was a devout High Church Anglican. He was a sceptic who always stressed the importance of working things out by observation and thought. But he was also haunted by feelings of guilt, had terrible doubts about his own salvation, and really did want to have evidence that there was a world beyond this one in which wrongs were put right. This is Johnson's account of what happened.

On the night of the 1st of February many gentlemen eminent for their rank and character were, by the invitation of the Reverend Mr. Aldrich, of Clerkenwell, assembled at his house, for the examination of the noises supposed to be made by a departed spirit, for the detection of some enormous crime. About ten at night the gentlemen met in the chamber in which the girl, supposed to be disturbed by a spirit, had, with proper caution, been put to bed by several ladies. They sat rather

more than an hour, and hearing nothing, went down stairs, when they interrogated the father of the girl, who denied, in the strongest terms, any knowledge or belief of fraud. The supposed spirit had before publicly promised, by an affirmative knock, that it would attend one of the gentlemen into the vault under the Church of St. John, Clerkenwell, where the body is deposited, and give a token of her presence there, by a knock upon her coffin; it was therefore determined to make this trial of the existence or veracity of the supposed spirit. While they were enquiring and deliberating, they were summoned into the girl's chamber by some ladies who were near her bed, and who had heard knocks and scratches. When the gentlemen entered, the girl declared that she felt the spirit like a mouse upon her back, and was required to hold her hands out of bed. From that time, though the spirit was very solemnly required to manifest its existence by appearance, by impression on the hand or body of any present, by scratches, knocks, or any other agency, no evidence of any preter-natural power was exhibited. The spirit was then very seriously advertised that the person to whom the promise was made of striking the coffin, was then about to visit the vault, and that the performance of the promise was then claimed. The company at one o'clock went into the church, and the gentleman to whom the promise was made, went with another into the vault. The spirit was solemnly required to perform its promise, but nothing more than silence ensued: the person supposed to be accused by the spirit, then went down with several others, but no effect was perceived. Upon their return they examined the girl, but could draw no confession from her. Between two and three she desired and was permitted to go home with her father. It is, therefore, the opinion of the whole assembly, that the child has some art of making or counterfeiting a particular noise, and that there is no agency of any higher cause.

After this, Revd Moore confided to William Kent that he had changed his mind, and now believed the Parsons were frauds. But too many people had an interest in the Cock Lane Ghost for it to vanish just yet.

## *V. St Paul's Churchyard*

Had it not been for the newspapers, the story of the Cock Lane Ghost would have never have got going as it did. The *Public Ledger* was a new, innovative paper funded by advertising rather than the support of a political party. It employed its own 'ghost correspondent', and it was the outlet for the Parsons' families information, gradually escalating the allegations. The older *Daily Post*

was more sceptical; the people who believed the Ghost was a hoax tended to use *Lloyd's Evening Post*, and this paper, for instance, was where Revd Aldrich of Clerkenwell published his letters.

By mid-February, the public mood, fanned by the partisan newspapers, was incendiary. The Lord Mayor feared that the City would collapse into disorder if the scandal didn't come to an end. Elizabeth Parsons was being moved from house to house as the committee of investigation tried to catch her in a deceit. On the 14<sup>th</sup> she was put to bed in a hammock and the knocking noises stopped when her hands were outside the bedclothes. The Ghost did not manifest itself, and the Committee warned the Parsons family that if it didn't put in an appearance by Sunday 21<sup>st</sup> they would all be going to Newgate Prison. A maid saw Elizabeth 'conceal on her person a small piece of wood' after which the noises began again. On the 25<sup>th</sup> a pamphlet called *The Mystery Revealed* was published, giving an account of the affair sympathetic to William Kent – it was probably written by Dr Johnson's friend Oliver Goldsmith. This, and the proof that Fanny's body was still resting quietly in the crypt of Clerkenwell Parish Church and had not been illegally removed as some newspaper reports had stated, finally prompted Revd John Moore to print a retraction:

In justice to the person, whose reputation has been attacked in a most gross manner, by the pretended Ghost in Cock-lane; to check the credulity of the weak; to defeat the attempts of the malicious, and to prevent further imposition, on account of this absurd phenomenon, I do hereby certify, that though, from the several attendances on this occasion, I have not been able to point out, how, and in what manner, those knockings and scratchings, of the supposed Ghost, were *contrived, performed, and continued*; yet, that I am convinced, that those knockings and scratchings were the effects of some artful, wicked contrivance; and that I was, in a more especial manner, convinced of its being such, on the first of this month, when I attended with several persons of rank and character, who assembled at the Rev. Mr. Aldrich's, Clerkenwell, in order to examine into this iniquitous imposition upon the Public. Since which time I have not seen the child, nor heard the noises; and think myself in duty bound to add, that the injured person (when present to hear himself accused by the pretended Ghost) has not, by his behaviour, given the least ground of suspicion, but has preserved that becoming steadfastness, which nothing, I am persuaded, but innocence could inspire.

That *volte-face*, however, will not save Mr Moore. The Lord Mayor of London at last acts and has him, Mr and Mrs Parsons, their cousin Mary Frazer, and a neighbour in Cock Lane Richard James, who'd been assisting at the séances,

arrested and charged with conspiracy. They are committed for trial at the Guildhall.

## **VI. The Guildhall**

This is the centre of power in 18<sup>th</sup>-century London, and this is where the story of the Cock Lane Ghost reaches its conclusion. The trial of Richard Parsons and others opens on 10<sup>th</sup> July 1762, presided over by William Murray, the Lord Chief Justice. Interestingly they are charged not with fraud, but with conspiracy to secure the death of William Kent. The witnesses include Mr Kent himself; the Parsons's maid Esther Carlisle (nicknamed Carrots on account of her red hair); James Franzen, the Cock Lane publican; Dr Cooper who had attended Fanny; James Jones the apothecary; the carpenter who made her coffin; the Revds Ross, Broughton and Moore who'd all supported the Ghost; and various character witnesses for Richard Parsons.

The trial only took a day, though it didn't conclude until 9.30pm, and even then Lord Murray still had 90 minutes of summing-up to offer. But the jury took a mere 15 minutes to reach a verdict – perhaps they just all wanted to go to bed. They found all five defendants guilty. Committed to custody in the hope they would come to terms, Revd Moore and Richard James agreed to pay William Kent £588 in compensation. Mr Parsons himself was sentenced to be pilloried three times and then spend 2 years in prison; his wife was to be imprisoned for a year; Mary Frazer got six months with hard labour.

So Richard Parsons sat in the pillory at the end of Cock Lane itself, still proclaiming his innocence. The crowd collected money for him, but we don't know what became of him after that, nor the other defendants, except Mr Moore, who died aged only 35 in 1768. Young Elizabeth Parsons married, and eventually died in 1806. Dr Johnson never had his belief in the afterlife proved.

Plays, poems and leaflets referred to the Cock Lane Ghost story for a while afterwards. One of the first off the mark was William Hogarth, who produced a brilliant, vicious satirical print called *Credulity, Superstition and Fanaticism* only a few days after the plotters were sent to prison. It refers to a whole gamut of supernatural stories, from the phantom Drummer of Tadworth to Mary Toft, the woman who gave birth to rabbits, and the Boy of Bilston who vomited nails and other weird objects, all set in a wild Methodist meeting with people crying, howling, and passing out with emotion. Several of the congregation are holding models of the Cock Lane Ghost and right beneath the pulpit is a Methodist preacher sticking one of these little figures down a

young woman's cleavage. It's very scurrilous indeed, but it sums up what most people come to feel about this story and others like it.

By the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the story of what happened in Cock Lane some decades before was more or less forgotten. But we are not *quite* at the end.

## VII. *The Riverside*

How did so many people end up believing the story? It's striking that it follows the same pattern as a lot of poltergeist events over the succeeding centuries, at Battersea, Enfield, Bournemouth, and other places – a pubescent girl as the focus, starting with mysterious knockings and scratchings, the media getting involved, the phenomena gradually becoming more elaborate, and the same arguments over what is genuine and what's contrived. But only the Cock Lane affair mapped onto social and religious conflict in quite such an incendiary way.

It's interesting to reflect on parallel stories. In 1970 a journalist called Frank Smyth, who worked on a magazine called *Man, Myth and Magic*, decided to invent a ghost to see what happened. He concocted the story of an 18<sup>th</sup>-century vicar of St Anne's Limehouse who befriended sailors and other travellers in the dock areas of Wapping, only to murder and rob them, and who was eventually drowned in chains on Wapping Stairs for his crimes. The story was published in the magazine, and then repeated by various newspapers, books, and even on TV. Five years later Frank Smyth told the *Sunday Times* that he'd made the story up, but by that time dozens of people claimed they'd *seen* the ghost of the evil priest of Limehouse. In a followup article, Smyth tried to persuade a group of river workers that it was all a fiction, but they swore blind that their grandfathers had told them the story and they'd been terrified by it as children. Which, of course, couldn't be true. Sometimes we believe what we want to believe, and can't be told otherwise.

But there is one final twist. In 1855 or thereabouts, the architect JW Archer wrote this:

While drawing the crypt of St. John's, Clerkenwell, in a narrow cloister on the north side, there being at that time coffins, fragments of shrouds, and human remains lying about in disorder, the sexton's boy pointed to one of the coffins, and said that it was 'Scratching Fanny'. This reminding me of the Cock Lane Ghost, I removed the lid of the coffin, which was loose, and saw the body of a woman. The face was perfect, handsome, oval, with an aquiline nose. I inquired of one of the

churchwardens of the time, Mr. Bird, who said the coffin had always been understood to contain the body of the woman whose spirit was said to have haunted the house in Cock Lane.

The body of Fanny Lynes, or Kent, then, was *incorrupt*. Folklore would maintain that that was a sign either of the person's great saintliness or great vice during life. But there is another explanation. Abnormal preservation of body tissues is one of the effects of arsenic poisoning.



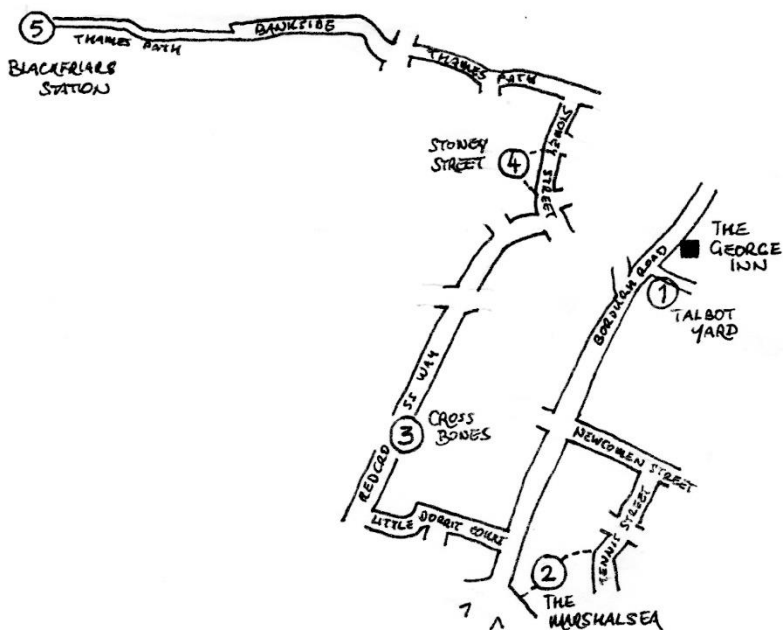
*Looking at Hogarth – photo by Mr Luc*

## 5. Walk 28 – Dickens's Dark London, 23 September 2012

I have never been a great fan of Charles Dickens. I find his picturesque characters with their amusing names frankly irritating, and I am too influenced by the Sunday evening BBC costume dramas of my childhood based on Dickens novels which seemed to drag on and on for interminable weeks of uninterrupted glumness. So this Walk arose from a challenge. I asked my friends of London Gothic what topics they might like me to cover, and Tim suggested Dickens. It was so unlikely I decided to see what I could make of it, and having discovered some descriptions of London scenes and events from Dickens's pen I thought I could weave something convincing out of that. In the end I had to edit Dickens's writings quite a lot, but the sense, I hope, remained, and much of what follows is Dickens text.

The weather forecast was dreadful, and accurate. We huddled in a couple of rooms at the 17<sup>th</sup>-century George Inn on Borough High Street, and after some debate concluded that valour was called for and set off into the rain and tempest, nothing daunted. My friend Dr Bones even came with her dog Boots on a very rare trip to the capital. We were a relatively small group, damp and windblown, but we got through the whole route and even enjoyed ourselves. At least Tim came along so I could prove I'd done it.

We set off quite briskly (against the wind) and stopped first at Talbot Yard.



## I. Talbot Yard

I referred to the BBC Dickens adaptations which seemed so frequent years ago. What you lost in them was much of Dickens's *language*, which, like most Victorian prose, was verbose – after all, he was being paid to fill pages! – but was sometimes hard and realistic and on occasion quite dark. Dickens's early training was as a journalist which schooled him in careful observation and attention to detail. A good example comes in his collection of essays called *Night Walks*, written after insomnia left him wandering the streets of London:

Some years ago, a temporary inability to sleep, referable to a distressing impression, caused me to walk about the streets all night, for a series of several nights. The disorder might have taken a long time to conquer, if it had been faintly experimented on in bed; but it was soon defeated by the brisk treatment of getting up directly after lying down, and going out, and coming home tired at sunrise.

In the course of those nights, I finished my education in a fair amateur experience of houselessness. My principal object being to get through the night, the pursuit of it brought me into sympathetic relations with people who have no other object every night of the year.

The month was March, and the weather damp, cloudy, and cold. The sun not rising before half-past five, the night perspective looked sufficiently long at half-past twelve: which was about my time for confronting it.

The restlessness of a great city, and the way in which it tumbles and tosses before it can get to sleep, formed one of the first entertainments offered to the contemplation of us houseless people. It lasted about two hours. We lost a great deal of companionship when the late public-houses turned their lamps out, and when the potmen thrust the last brawling drunkards into the street; but stray vehicles and stray people were left us, after that. If we were very lucky, a policeman's rattle sprang and a fray turned up; but, in general, surprisingly little of this diversion was provided. Except in the Haymarket, which is the worst kept part of London, and about Kent-street in the Borough, and along a portion of the line of the Old Kent-road, the peace was seldom violently broken. But, it was always the case that London, as if in imitation of individual citizens belonging to it, had expiring fits and starts of restlessness. After all seemed quiet, if one cab rattled by, half-a-dozen would surely follow; and intoxicated people appeared to be magnetically attracted towards each other, so that we knew when we saw one drunken object staggering against the shutters of a shop, that another drunken object would

stagger up before five minutes were out, to fraternise or fight with it. At length these flickering sparks would die away, and London would sink to rest. And then the yearning of the houseless mind would be for any sign of company, any lighted place, any movement, anything suggestive of any one being up – nay, even so much as awake.

Dickens wasn't only a reporter describing what he saw for the sake of it, but was also writing out of a distinct political point of view: he was looking for reform in various aspects and institutions of 19<sup>th</sup>-century British life, and he had various weapons in his armoury. The first was *sentiment*, tugging on his readers' heartstrings by presenting vulnerable human beings, especially children, in dire straits. The second of his weapons was *satire*, exaggerating the bureaucracy and stupidity of British life and organisations. Here is his description of an imaginary Government department from *Little Dorrit*:

The Circumlocution Office was (as everybody knows without being told) the most important Department under Government. No public business of any kind could possibly be done at any time without the acquiescence of the Circumlocution Office. Its finger was in the largest public pie, and the smallest public tart. It was equally impossible to do the plainest right and to undo the plainest wrong without its express authority. Whatever was to be done, the Circumlocution Office was beforehand with all the public departments in the art of perceiving – HOW NOT TO DO IT.

It is true that How Not To Do It was the great study and object of all public departments and professional politicians all round the Circumlocution Office. It is true that every new premier and every new government, coming in because they had upheld a certain thing as necessary to be done, were no sooner come in than they applied their utmost faculties to discovering How Not To Do It. It is true that from the moment a general election was over, every returned man who had been raving on hustings because it hadn't been done, and who had been asking the friends of the honourable gentleman in the opposite interest on pain of impeachment to tell him why it hadn't been done, and who had been asserting that it must be done, and who had been pledging himself that it should be done, began to devise, How It Was Not To Be Done. It is true that the debates of both Houses of Parliament the whole session through, uniformly tended to the protracted deliberation, How Not To Do It. It is true that the royal speech at the opening of each session virtually said, My lords and gentlemen, you have a considerable stroke of work to do, and you will please retire to your respective

chambers, and discuss, How Not To Do It. All this is true, but the Circumlocution Office went beyond it.

Numbers of people were lost in the Circumlocution Office.

Unfortunates with wrongs, or with projects for the general welfare, had been bullied in this, over-reached by that, and evaded by the other; got referred at last to the Circumlocution Office, and never reappeared in the light of day. Boards sat upon them, secretaries minuted upon them, commissioners gabbled about them, clerks registered, entered, checked, and ticked them off, and they melted away. In short, all the business of the country went through the Circumlocution Office, except the business that never came out of it; and *its* name was Legion.

If Dickens's first weapon was sentiment, and his second satire, his third was *horror*. He could weave a terrifying picture as effectively as any sensational Gothic novelist. Here's another description from *The Uncommercial Traveller*.

The river had an awful look, the buildings on the banks were muffled in black shrouds, and the reflected lights seemed to originate deep in the water, as if the spectres of suicides were holding them to show where they went down. The wild moon and clouds were as restless as an evil conscience in a tumbled bed, and the very shadow of the immensity of London seemed to lie oppressively upon the river.

The idea of 'Dickensian London', bound up with our images of Christmas and so on, seems almost picturesque. But it's not: in many ways Dickens's city is a nightmarish place, and to there we go.

## ***II. The Marshalsea Prison***

When the BBC was plugging its adaptation of Mervyn Peake's *Gormenghast* books in 2000, they got John Sessions, who played Dr Prunesquallor, to characterise Peake's neo-medieval fantasy of weird characters and intricate prose as 'Dickens on crack'. Dickens was probably the biggest influence on Mervyn Peake, but the greatest difference is that Dickens had a social conscience of the kind Peake didn't. This place, the Marshalsea Prison, is where that conscience comes from. Only one brick wall remains of it.

John Dickens was imprisoned here for debt in 1824 when Charles was 12. It's worth remembering that despite its fearsome reputation, the building the Dickens family knew, the second Marshalsea, was nowhere near as dreadful as its predecessor; *that* prison, where in 1729 some three hundred inmates

starved to death over a period of three months, was truly appalling. But its replacement was bad enough. Here's how Dickens described it in *Little Dorrit*.

Thirty years ago there stood, a few doors short of the church of St George, in the borough of Southwark, on the left-hand side of the way going southward, the Marshalsea Prison. It had stood there many years before, and it remained there some years afterwards; but it is gone now, and the world is none the worse without it.

It was an oblong pile of barrack building, partitioned into squalid houses standing back to back, so that there were no back rooms; environed by a narrow paved yard, hemmed in by high walls duly spiked at top. Itself a closed and confined prison for debtors, it contained within it a much closer and more confined jail for smugglers. Offenders against the revenue laws, and defaulters to excise or customs who had incurred fines which they were unable to pay, were supposed to be incarcerated behind an iron-plated door closing up a second prison, consisting of a strong cell or two, and a blind alley some yard and a half wide, which formed the mysterious termination of the very limited skittle-ground in which the Marshalsea debtors bowled down their troubles.

The Marshalsea – even rebuilt – was horribly overcrowded and deeply unjust in its management, but not much worse than the streets around it, and John Dickens was only imprisoned here for 3 months. Nevertheless, the experience left his family fatally disrupted. Charles Dickens was a middle-class boy plunged into sudden poverty. As a result of his father's bankruptcy, he was sent to work in Warren's black-polish factory near Charing Cross, and that marked him for life like nothing else. This is his description, from a letter to his friend John Forster:

The blacking warehouse was the last house on the left-hand side of the way, at old Hungerford Stairs. It was a crazy, tumble-down old house, abutting of course on the river, and literally overrun with rats. Its wainscotted rooms and its rotten floors and staircase, and the old grey rats swarming down in the cellars, and the sound of their squeaking and scuffling coming up the stairs at all times, and the dirt and decay of the place, rise up visibly before me, as if I were there again. The counting-house was on the first floor, looking over the coal-barges and the river. There was a recess in it, in which I was to sit and work. My work was to cover the pots of paste-blackening: first with a piece of oil-paper, and then with a piece of blue paper, to tie them round with a string; and then to clip the paper close and neat all round, until it

looked as smart as a pot of ointment from an apothecary's shop. When a certain number of grosses of pots had attained this pitch of perfection, I was to paste on each a printed label; and then go on again with more pots.

Two or three other boys were kept at similar duty downstairs on similar wages. One of them came up, in a ragged apron and a paper cap, on the first Monday morning, to show me the trick of using the string and tying the knot. His name was Bob Fagin; and I took the liberty of using his name long afterwards, in *Oliver Twist*.

Dickens never became a socialist – his cure for injustice was for the rich to be kinder to the poor. But the passion and outrage in his writing is very genuine indeed.

### ***III. Cross Bones***

This place has nothing to do with Dickens as such; it's an ancient graveyard saved from developers and now used particularly to remember the outcast and the lost, and you can find out about that story elsewhere. But it is a suitable place to recall the really morbid side of Dickens's imagination – his fascination with death and deathliness, which arose not just from a journalist's interest in social realism, but a deep sensibility. Here is his passage on graveyards from *The Uncommercial Traveller*.

Such strange churchyards hide in the City of London; churchyards sometimes so entirely detached from churches, always so pressed on by houses; so small, so rank, so silent, so forgotten, except by the few people who ever look down into them from their smoky windows. As I stand peeping in through the iron gates and rails, I can peel the rusty metal off, like bark from an old tree. The illegible tomb-stones are all lop-sided, the grave-mounds lost their shape in the rains of a hundred years ago, the Lombardy Poplar or Plane Tree that was once a drysalter's daughter and several common-councilmen, has withered like those worthies, and its departed leaves are dust beneath it. Contagion of slow ruin overhangs the place. The discoloured tiles roofs of the environing buildings stand so awry, that they can hardly be proof against any stress of weather. Old crazy stacks of chimneys seem to look down as their overhang, dubiously calculating how far they will have to fall. In an angle of its walls, what was once the tool-house of the grave-digger rots away, encrusted with toadstools. Pipes and spouts for carrying off the rain from the encompassing gables,

broken or feloniously cut for lead long ago, now let the rain drip and splash as it list, upon the weedy earth. Sometimes there is a rusty pump somewhere near, and as I look in at the rails and meditate, I hear it working under an unknown hand with a creaking protest; as though the departed in the churchyard urged, 'Let us lie here in peace; don't suck us up and drink us!'

And here we might recall Dickens's visit to the church of St Olave Hart Street, or, as he was pleased to describe it semi-confidentially, as though he was loth to share it, St Ghastly Grim. We've already quoted this in the walk on City Churches (see pp.13-14). Even for those of us with a good Gothic habit of mind there is something really creepy about Dickens's lip-licking emphasis on the skulls carved over St Olave's gateway, and his impressions that they are grimacing with the pain of the iron spikes on which they are fixed. 'The attraction of repulsion', he characterises his feelings, and there are few better summaries of the Gothic temper. After his visit to St Ghastly Grim in a thunderstorm – what a Goth thing to do! – Dickens is so pleased with the experience that –

Having no other person to whom to impart my satisfaction, I communicated it to the cab driver. So far from being responsive, he surveyed me – he was naturally a bottle-nosed, red-faced man – with a blanched countenance. And as he drove me back, he ever and again glanced in over his shoulder through the little front window of his carriage, as if mistrusting that I was a fare originally from a grave in the churchyard of St Ghastly Grim, who might have flitted home again without paying.

#### *IV. Stoney Street*

Dickens was born in 1812 and died in 1870. Between those dates London's population rocketed; former villages were absorbed by streets of new housing. New houses, but not always good: in fact, very often the buildings that formed this expansion were cheap, rough, and crowded, breeding grounds for diseases such as cholera. For Dickens, the city is typically a place of degradation and horror. This is from *Little Dorrit*:

Mr Arthur Clennan, newly arrived from Marseilles by way of Dover, sat in the window of a coffee-house on Ludgate Hill. [He does this again, as you will see.] Ten thousand responsible houses surrounded him, frowning heavily on the streets they composed. Fifty thousand lairs surrounded him, where people lived so unwholesomely that fair water

put into their crowded rooms on Saturday night, would be corrupt on Sunday morning. Miles of close wells and pits of houses, where the inhabitants gasped for air, stretched far away towards every point of the compass. Through the heart of the town a deadly sewer ebbed and flowed in the place of a fine fresh river.

One of the most striking descriptions in Dickens's work is of a place in *Bleak House* he calls Tom All-Alone's. In the illustration in the first edition of the novel, you can see Southwark Cathedral in the background, so it must have been intended to be somewhere close by, which is why we're here in Stoney Street, with the Cathedral not far away.

Dickens often used children to make his social and political points; it seems a bit sentimental to us, but his intention is to pluck his readers' heartstrings in the same way modern charities use children in their advertising even if their interest is in more general welfare.

Jo lives – that is to say, Jo has not yet died – in a ruinous place, known to the like of him by the name of Tom-all-Alone's. It is a black, dilapidated street, avoided by all decent people; where the crazy houses were seized upon, when their decay was far advanced, by some bold vagrants who, after establishing their own possession, took to letting them out in lodgings. Now, these tumbling tenements contain, by night, a swarm of misery. As on the ruined human wretch, vermin parasites appear, so, these ruined shelters have bred a crowd of foul existence that crawls in and out of gaps in walls and boards; and coils itself to sleep, in maggot numbers, where the rain drips in, and comes and goes, fetching and carrying fever, and sowing more evil in its footprint than all the fine gentlemen in office shall set right in five hundred years – though they are born expressly to do it.

Twice, lately, there has been a crash and a cloud of dust, like the springing of a mine, in Tom-all-Alone's; and, each time, a house has fallen. These accidents have made a paragraph in the newspapers, and have filled a bed or two in the nearest hospital. The gaps remain, and there are not unpopular lodgings among the rubbish. As several more houses nearby are nearly ready to go, the next crash in Tom-all-Alone's may be expected to be a good one.

This desirable property is [the subject of a case] in Chancery, of course. Whether 'Tom' is the original plaintiff or defendant, or whether Tom lived here when the suit had laid the street waste, all alone, until other settlers came to join him; or, whether the traditional title is a comprehensive name for a retreat cut off from honest company and put

out of the pale of hope; perhaps nobody knows. Certainly, Jo don't know.

'For *I* don't,' says Jo, '*I* don't know nothink.'

It must be a strange state to be like Jo! To shuffle through the streets, unfamiliar with the shapes and in utter darkness as to the meaning, of those mysterious symbols, so abundant over the shops, and the corner of streets, and on the doors, and in the windows! To see people read, and to see people write, and to see the postman deliver letters, and not to have the least idea of all that language – to be, to every scrap of it, stone blind and dumb! It must be very puzzling to see the good company going to the churches on Sundays, with their books in their hands and to think (for perhaps Jo *does* think, at odd times) what does it all mean, and if it means anything to anybody, how comes it that it means nothing to me? It must be a strange state, not merely to be told that I am scarcely human, but to feel it of my own knowledge all my life! To see the horses, dogs, and cattle, go by me, and to know that in ignorance I belong to them, and not to the superior beings in my shape.

That's enough of that – but if anything, this account of a pub in Rotherhithe about a mile east of here, included in a letter from Dickens to Angela Burdett-Coutts, goes far beyond it in sheer horribleness:

There is a public house in it, with the odd sign of The Ship Aground, but it is wonderfully appropriate, for everything seems to have gone aground there – never to be got off anymore until the whole globe is stopped in its rolling and shivered. Odious sheds for horses, and donkeys, and vagrants, and rubbish in front of the parlour windows – wooden houses like horrible old packing cases full of fever for a countless number of years. In a broken-down gallery at the back of a row of these, there was a wan child looking over at a starved old white horse who was making a meal of oyster shells. And the child and I, and the pale horse, stared at one another in silence for some five minutes as if we were so many figures in a dismal allegory. I went round to look at the front of the house, but the windows were all broken and the door was shut up as tightly as anything so dismantled could be. Lord knows when anybody will go in to the child, but I suppose it's looking over still – with a little wiry head of hair, as pale as the horse, all sticking up on its head – and an old weazen face – and two bony hands holding on the rail of the gallery, with little fingers like convulsed skewers.

## V. *Blackfriars Station*

The railway had a huge impact on 19<sup>th</sup>-century London. Not *this* one – Blackfriars underground station was only built in 1870, and the overground one in the 1880s, long after Dickens's death. The earliest railway station in London was Spa Road, Bermondsey, opened in 1836, and others opened in quick succession. The big stations such as Paddington and St Pancras required cutting through the city, often demolishing areas of housing that were relatively new, displacing both the living *and* the dead. Dickens acknowledges this in *Dombey and Son*. In this passage, Mr Dombey comes into London by train through the slums of Camden Town where Dickens had himself lived. Dombey is mourning the death of his son Paul, and this affects the way he feels about the railway, which he sees as the devourer of human life. It's a hugely Gothic image.

The very speed at which the train was whirled along, mocked the swift course of the young life that had been borne away so steadily and so inexorably to its foredoomed end. The power that forced itself upon its iron way – its own – defiant of all paths and roads, piercing through the heart of every obstacle, and dragging living creatures of all classes, ages, and degrees behind it, was a type of the triumphant monster, Death.

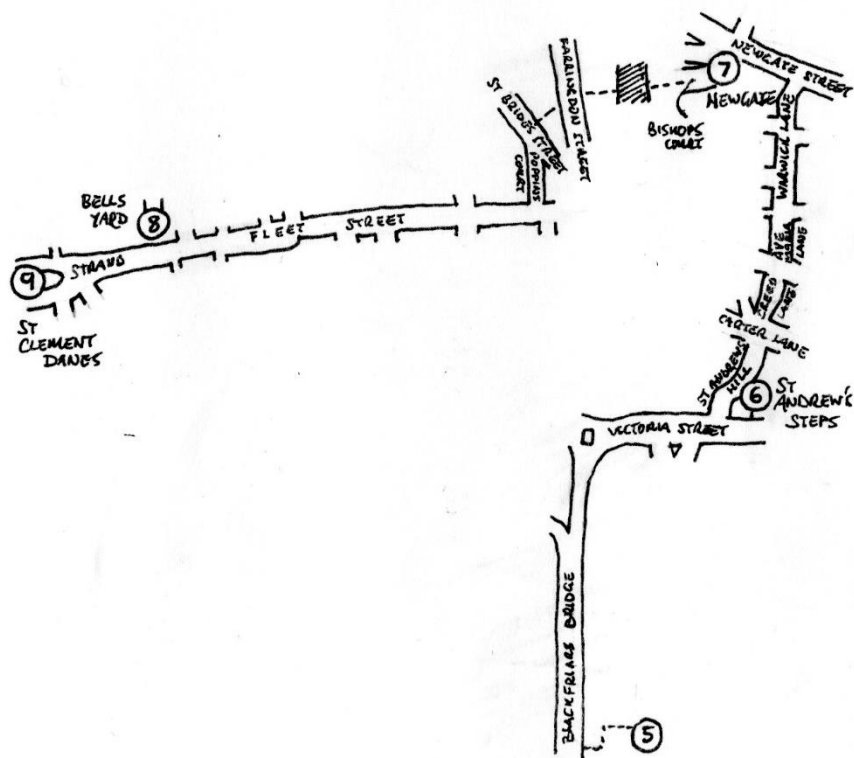
Away, with a shriek, and a roar, and a rattle, from the town, burrowing among the dwellings of men, making the streets hum, flashing out into the meadows for a moment, mining in through the damp earth, booming on in darkness and heavy air, bursting out again into the sunny day so bright and wide; away, with a shriek, and a roar, and a rattle, through the fields, through the woods, through the corn, through the hay, through the chalk, through the mould, through the clay, through the rock, among objects close at hand and almost in the grasp, ever flying from the traveller, and a deceitful distance ever moving slowly within him: like as in the track of the remorseless monster, Death!

Through the hollow, on the height, by the heath, by the orchard, by the park, by the garden, over the canal, across the river, where the sheep are feeding, where the mill is going, where the barge is floating, where the dead are lying, where the factory is smoking, where the stream is running, where the village clusters, where the great cathedral rises, where the bleak moor lies, and the wild breeze smooths or ruffles it at its inconstant will; away, with a shriek, and a roar, and a rattle, and no trace to leave behind but dust and vapour: like as in the track of the remorseless monster, Death!

Louder and louder yet, it shrieks and cries as it comes tearing on resistless to the goal: and now its way, still like the way of Death, is strewn with ashes thickly.

Everything around is blackened. There are dark pools of water, muddy lanes, and miserable habitations far below. There are jagged walls and falling houses close at hand, and through the battered roofs and broken windows, wretched rooms are seen, where want and fever hide themselves in many wretched shapes, while smoke and crowded gables, and distorted chimneys, and deformity of brick and mortar penning up deformity of mind and body, choke the murky distance. As Mr Dombey looks out of his carriage window, it is never in his thoughts that the monster who has brought him here has let the light of day in on these things: not made, or caused them. It was the journey's fitting end, and might have been the end of everything, it was so ruinous and dreary.

Keep this truly Hellish vision in mind as we go over the river into the City.



## VI. *St Andrew's Steps*

I don't think Dickens believed in God: he used Christian language, and never formally left the Church of England, but always treats Jesus Christ as a moral example to be followed rather than a Saviour. Dickens uses religion in the same way he uses children – to arouse his readers' sympathies and consciences. Here is a picture of his idea of the Church from *Little Dorrit*:

It was a Sunday evening in London, gloomy, close, and stale. Maddening church bells of all degrees of dissonance, sharp and flat, cracked and clear, fast and slow, made the brick-and-mortar echoes hideous. Melancholy streets, in a penitential garb of soot, steeped the souls of the people who were condemned to look at them out of windows, in dire despondency. In every thoroughfare, up almost every alley, and down almost every turning, some doleful bell was throbbing, jerking, tolling, as if the Plague were in the city and the dead-carts were going round.

Mr Arthur Clennam sat in the window of the coffee-house on Ludgate Hill, counting one of the neighbouring bells, making sentences and burdens of songs out of it in spite of himself, and wondering how many sick people it might be the death of in the course of the year. As the hour approached, its changes of measure made it more and more exasperating. At the quarter, it went off into a condition of deadly-lively importunity, urging the populace in a voluble manner to Come to church, Come to church, Come to church! At the ten minutes, it became aware that the congregation would be scanty, and slowly hammered out in low spirits, They WON'T come, They WON'T come, They WON'T come! At the five minutes, it abandoned hope, and shook every house in the neighbourhood for three hundred seconds, with one dismal swing per second, as a groan of despair. 'Thank heaven!' said Clennam, when the hour struck, and the bell stopped.

But its sound had revived a long train of miserable Sundays, and the procession would not stop with the bell, but continued to march on. 'Heaven forgive me,' said he, 'and those who trained me. How I have hated this day!'

There was the dreary Sunday of his childhood, when he sat with his hands before him, scared out of his senses by a horrible tract which commenced its business with the poor child by asking him in its title, Why he was going to Perdition? There was the sleepy Sunday of his boyhood when, like a military deserter, he was marched to chapel by a piquet of teachers three times a day. There was the interminable

Sunday of his nonage, when his mother, stern of face and unrelenting of heart, would sit all day behind a Bible, as if it, of all books, were a fortification against sweetness of temper, natural affection, and gentle intercourse. There was the resentful Sunday of a little later, when he sat down glowering and glooming through the tardy length of the day, with a sullen sense of injury in his heart. There was a legion of Sundays, all days of unserviceable bitterness and mortification, slowly passing before him.

But sometimes Dickens could look at a church and find some humanity in it, or rather in those who worshipped there in the past. Here in the City the population was drastically falling, leaving the old churches behind, and Dickens visited many of them. A passage in *The Uncommercial Traveller* finds him in a less jaundiced mood:

The dark vestries and registries into which I have peeped, and the little hemmed-in churchyards that have echoed to my feet, have left impressions on my memory as distinct and quaint as any. In all those dusty registers that the worms are eating, there is not a line but made some hearts leap, or some tears flow, in their day. Still and dry now, still and dry! and the old tree at the window with no room for its branches, has seen them all out. So with the tomb of the old Master of the Company, on which it drips. His son restored it and died, his daughter restored it and died, and then he had been remembered long enough, and the tree took possession of him, and his name cracked out.

Dismal though this all is, it's comparatively lighthearted compared to what comes next – a visit to arguably the darkest place in the capital, the condemned cell of Newgate Prison.

## **VII. Newgate**

In 1793 executions were moved from Tyburn to here. Dickens visited the prison in the mid-1830s and published an account of what he saw in *Sketches by Boz*. A few years later he adapted this experience into his description of the last hours of Fagin in *Oliver Twist*.

The judge assumed the black cap, and the prisoner stood still with the same air and gesture. The address was solemn and impressive; the sentence fearful to hear. But he stood, like a marble figure, without the motion of a nerve. The jailer put his hand upon his arm, and beckoned him away. He gazed stupidly about him for an instant, and obeyed.

They led him through a paved room under the court, where some prisoners were waiting till their turns came, and others were talking to their friends, who crowded round a grate which looked into the open yard. As he passed, the prisoners fell back to render him more visible to the people who were clinging to the bars: and they assailed him with opprobrious names, and screeched and hissed. He shook his fist, and would have spat upon them; but his conductors hurried him on, into the interior of the prison.

Here, he was searched, that he might not have about him the means of anticipating the law; this ceremony performed, they led him to one of the condemned cells, and left him there alone.

He sat down on a stone bench opposite the door, which served for a seat and bedstead; and casting his blood-shot eyes upon the ground, tried to collect his thoughts. After a while, he began to remember a few disjointed fragments of what the judge had said, though it had seemed to him at the time that he could not hear a word. In a little time he had the whole, almost as it was delivered. To be hanged by the neck, till he was dead – that was the end. To be hanged by the neck till he was dead.

As it came on very dark, he began to think of all the men he had known who had died upon the scaffold; some of them through his means. They rose up, in such quick succession, that he could hardly count them. He had seen some of them die, - and had joked, too, because they died with prayers upon their lips. With what a rattling noise the drop went down; and how suddenly they changed, from strong and vigorous men to dangling heaps of clothes!

Some of them might have inhabited that very cell – sat upon that very spot. It was very dark; why didn't they bring a light? The cell had been built for many years. Scores of men must have passed their last hours there. It was like sitting in a vault strewn with dead bodies – the cap, the noose, the pinioned arms, the faces that he knew, even beneath that hideous veil. – Light, light!

At length, when his hands were raw with beating against the heavy door and walls, two men appeared: one bearing a candle, which he thrust into an iron candlestick fixed against the wall: the other dragged in a mattress on which to pass the night; for the prisoner was to be left alone no more.

Then came night. Other watchers are glad to hear the church-clocks strike, for they tell of life and coming day. To the Jew they brought

despair. The boom of every iron bell came laden with the one, deep, hollow sound – Death.

The day passed. Day? There was no day; it was gone as soon as come – and night came on again; night so long, and yet so short; long in its dreadful silence, and short in its fleeting hours. At one time he raved and blasphemed; and at another howled and tore his hair. Venerable men of his own persuasion had come to pray beside him, but he had driven them away with curses.

Saturday night. He had only one more night to live. And as he thought of this, the day broke – Sunday.

It was not until the night of this last awful day, that a withering sense of his desperate state came in its full intensity; not that he had ever held any defined or positive hope of mercy, but that he had never been able to consider more than the dim probability of dying so soon. Now, he started up, every minute, and with gasping mouth and burning skin, hurried to and fro, in such a paroxysm of fear and wrath that even his guardians – used to such sights – recoiled from him. He grew so terrible, in all the tortures of his evil conscience, that one man could not bear to sit there, eyeing him alone; and so two kept watch together. Those dreadful walls of Newgate, which have hidden so much misery not only from the eyes, but, too often and too long, from the thoughts, of men, never held so dread a spectacle as that. The few who lingered as they passed, and wondered what the man was doing who was to be hanged tomorrow, would have slept but ill that night, if they could have seen him.

In the story, Oliver then comes to visit Fagin in an attempt to redeem him, and Fagin makes a botched effort to escape.

Day was dawning when they again emerged. A great multitude had already assembled; the windows were filled with people, smoking and playing cards to beguile the time; the crowd were pushing, quarrelling, joking. Everything told of life and animation, but one dark cluster of objects in the centre of all – the black stage, the cross-beam, the rope, and all the hideous apparatus of death.

After *Oliver Twist* was published in 1838, there would be thirty more years of public executions at Newgate, and the prison itself stayed operating until 1902.

### VIII. *Bell's Yard*

In the heart of legal London, and only yards from the site of Temple Bar, we arrive at the location of perhaps Dickens's most famous description of the capital, in which fog is not just *fog* but a symbol of a legal system which is strangled by inefficiency and nonsense. The satire of the legal case of Jarndyce and Jarndyce in *Bleak House* was based, Dickens said, on a genuine example which took over fifty years to make its way through the Court of Chancery – although there was another already underway at the time Dickens was writing which would not finally conclude for over a *century*. Chancery was the court of the Lord Chancellor and dealt particularly with legacies, trusts, and some other matters. Its branch of the law was immensely complex and Chancery was overwhelmed with work, not least because the Lord Chancellor himself had many other claims on his time. It was already beginning to be reformed by the time Dickens wrote, though in *Bleak House* he's referring back to the 1820s.

LONDON. Michaelmas Term lately over, and the Lord Chancellor sitting in Lincoln's Inn Hall. Implacable November weather. As much mud in the streets, as if the waters had but newly retired from the face of the earth, and it would not be wonderful to meet a Megalosaurus, forty feet long or so, waddling like an elephantine lizard up Holborn Hill. Smoke lowering down from chimney-pots, making a soft black drizzle, with flakes of soot in it as big as full-grown snowflakes – gone into mourning, one might imagine, for the death of the sun. Dogs, undistinguishable in mire. Horses, scarcely better, splashed to their very blinkers. Foot passengers, jostling one another's umbrellas in a general infection of ill-temper, and losing their foot-hold at street-corners, where tens of thousands of other foot passengers have been slipping and sliding since the day broke. Fog everywhere. Fog up the river, where it flows among green aits and meadows; fog down the river, where it rolls defiled among the tiers of shipping, and the waterside pollutions of a great (and dirty) city. Fog on the Essex marshes, fog on the Kentish heights. Fog creeping into the cabooses of collier-brigs, fog lying out in the yards, and hovering in the rigging of great ships; fog drooping on the gunwales of barges and small boats. Chance people on the bridges peeping over the parapets into a nether sea of fog, with fog all round them, as if they were up in a balloon, and hanging in the misty clouds.

The raw afternoon is rawest, and the dense fog is densest, and the muddy streets are muddiest, near that leaden-headed old obstruction, Temple Bar. And hard by Temple Bar, in Lincoln's Inn Hall, at the

very heart of the fog, sits the Lord High Chancellor in his High Court of Chancery.

Chancery, which has its decaying houses and its blighted lands in every shire; which has its worn-out lunatic in every madhouse, and its dead in every churchyard; which has its ruined suitor, with his slipshod heels and threadbare dress, borrowing and begging through the rounds of every man's acquaintance; which gives to monied might, the means abundantly of wearing out the right; which so exhausts finances, patience, courage, hope; so overthrows the brain and breaks the heart; that there is not an honourable man among its practitioners who would not give – who does not often give – the warning, "Suffer any wrong that can be done you, rather than come here!"

The case of Jarndyce and Jarndyce drones on. This scarecrow of a suit has, in course of time, become so complicated, that no man alive knows what it means. Innumerable children have been born into the cause; innumerable young people have been married into it; innumerable old people have died out of it. Scores of persons have deliriously found themselves parties in Jarndyce and Jarndyce, without knowing how or why; whole families have inherited legendary hatreds with the suit. The little plaintiff or defendant, who was promised a new rocking-horse when Jarndyce and Jarndyce should be settled, has grown up, possessed himself of a real horse, and trotted away into the other world. Fair wards of court have faded into mothers and grandmothers; a long procession of Chancellors has come in and gone out; there are not three Jarndyces left upon the earth perhaps, since old Tom Jarndyce in despair blew his brains out at a coffee-house in Chancery Lane; but Jarndyce and Jarndyce still drags its dreary length before the Court.

## *IX. St Clement Danes*

No.186 The Strand was the home of Dickens's main publishers, Chapman & Hall, so this is a suitable place to end our journey – and to talk about the end of Dickens's own. When he died at only 58 in 1870 he looked much older. He had imposed a colossal workload on himself, but also he had the strain of living something of a double life. He had a close extra-marital relationship with the actress Ellen Ternan but how close remains a mystery even now. In 1865 he was involved in the Staplehurst rail crash, and behaved with considerable courage trying to rescue passengers from the debris, but his presence was kept a secret because he was travelling with Miss Ternan. After that he never wrote another novel, but spent his time (and made his money)

doing public readings from his existing works. The very last of these was at St James's Hall in Piccadilly in March 1870; he died from a stroke three months later.

Prominent Victorians realised how important Dickens was. Arthur Stanley, the Dean of Westminster Abbey, applauded his ability to 'deal cleanly with the darkest scenes and most degrading characters', while including the possibility of redemption which – for instance – Thomas Hardy didn't. Karl Marx, no less, claimed that Dickens 'issued to the world more political and social truths than have been uttered by all the professional politicians, publicists and moralists put together'. It's appropriate to recall, in front of the statue of another great Victorian reformer Gladstone, that art, and even art with a Gothic imagination, can actually achieve some good.

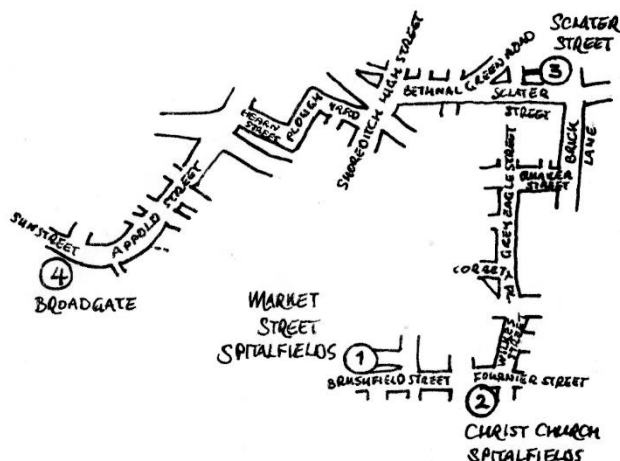


*At St Andrew's Steps – photo by Mrs Pacanowski*

## 6. Walk 30 – The Devil's Architect: Nicholas Hawksmoor, 12 May 2013

This Walk has the distinction of being the one that resulted in me being asked to leave a particular location, and, embarrassingly for an Anglican clergyperson, it was a church. Somehow it had never occurred to me that a couple of dozen people suddenly entering Christ Church, Spitalfields, and being talked at by me might pose a problem. I suppose I thought it would be empty: it wasn't, and even if I am not declaiming at full volume I'm difficult to screen out. 'This is a church', I was admonished by the place's guardians, a phrase that my friends made sure haunted me the rest of the walk!

I *did* wonder whether a walk about Nicholas Hawksmoor would be possible. There is remarkably little known about him, and if we wanted to visit more than a couple of his London buildings it would make for a very long traiipse indeed. So I ended up with few jokes or anecdotes. But Hawksmoor's name has become very *resonant*, and it was fun to think about why it has come to inspire dark imaginings; how he became 'the Devil's Architect'.



### I. Market Street, Spitalfields

We begin with a quote – rather abbreviated from the original, but a quote nonetheless:

The boy gazed steadily at me for an Instant and I cried, *Go on! Go on!*; and at this Moment, just as he was coming up to the spiry Turret, the timbers of the Scaffold cracked asunder and the Boy missed his Footing and fell from the Tower. He did not cry out but his Face seem'd to carry an Expression of Surprise: Curved lines are more beautiful than Straight, I thought to my self, as he fell away from the main Fabrick and was like to have dropped ripe at my own Feet.

The Mason his Father calling for Help rushed in the direction of the Pyramide, where now Thomas lay, and the Work men followed amaz'd. But he had expir'd at once. All those around stood stiff like a Figure, motionless and speechless, and I could hardly refrain from smiling at the Sight; but I hid my self with a woeful Countenance and advanc'd up to the Father who was ready to sink down with Grief. A littel Crowd of People was looking on with their *What is the Matter?* and *Is he quite dead?* and *Poor creature*, but I waved them away. The Mason was now quite stupid with Sorrow; he was alwaies a sullen and dogged Fellow but in his Grief he sett upon God and Heaven at a very fould rate, which pleased me mightily. I led him away and spoke to him gently. At any rate, *I said*, give him leave to be buried where he fell and according to Custom: to which in his Agony he assented.

And so all this was given to my Purpose: thus had I found the Sacrifice desir'd in the Spittle-Fields, and not at my own Hands: I had killed two birds, as they say, and as I coached it from White-chappell I rejoiced exceedingly.

This scene of blood and death, set at Christ Church in Spitalfields, is our introduction. We will return to the book it comes from, Peter Ackroyd's *Hawksmoor*, but for now bear in mind that it is complete fiction.

In the real world, imagine it is 1683. Sir Christopher Wren, Clerk of Works to the City, is 51, widowed for the second time, has a young family, and is embroiled in rows over the reconstruction of St Paul's Cathedral. He is introduced to a young man from Nottinghamshire who has been a magistrate's clerk. He, Nicholas Hawksmoor, becomes Wren's own clerk, assistant architect, and eventually surrogate older son. Later Hawksmoor joined the civil service staff at Scotland Yard, and worked with Wren and Sir John Vanburgh, and eventually on his own. But by the last twenty years of his life he was out of favour and nearly forgotten *except* as Wren's assistant.

Yet now, if you Google him, you will come across references to murder, occultism, and to this phrase, *The Devil's Architect*. How did this happen? Firstly, it's because his life is mysterious. His birth date isn't known; how he was introduced to Wren isn't known; he wrote little, and most of his letters are complaints about how badly he's been treated, or justifications for spending so much money on the rebuilding of Blenheim Palace where he worked with Vanburgh. There is only one contemporary portrait of Hawksmoor, and according to mood you might describe his appearance as 'stoic resignation' or just plain miserableness. Then there are his *buildings*, especially the churches he designed which look unlike any others before or since. In the absence of many words from the man himself, they have to speak for him.

## *II. Christ Church, Spitalfields*

As you approach the church, it's worth taking it all in. It seems designed to intimidate. Things are made *too big*. The main motif is a Venetian window, transformed into a doorway – but look at the size of it. One of Hawksmoor's most common tricks is to take motifs which were perfectly common in buildings at the time and make them enormous. This church glares at you and says, You are nothing. You are an insignificant speck.

Dan Waddell, the crime writer, says that he used to play five-a-side football where Spitalfields Market now is, and that the outside of Christ Church always impressed him in an eerie way, but that when he finally went in to it he was disappointed to find it 'light and airy and not at all macabre'. This contrast is very striking and perhaps deliberate on Hawksmoor's part: the exterior beats you down, and the inside picks you up again and gives you hope. In fact, what you can see inside is the result of extensive restoration: a generation ago it was a shell, and when we did the Walk the organ fund was still looking for a million pounds!

But, light as Hawksmoor's churches may be once you get inside them, they are still profoundly weird and it's hard to know what point he was making because he employs decorative elements which were completely unique and which make little sense. At St John Horsleydown – a church which no longer exists – and St Luke's Old Street, he put an obelisk on top of the tower, and proposed to do the same at St Giles-in-the-Fields. The tower of St George's Bloomsbury is topped not by a spire, but by a miniature Greek temple, a pyramid based on the Mausoleum of Halicarnassus, and finally a gilded statue

of King George I. None of these elements blend with one another at all. The idea of implicitly comparing the very unsaintly and unheroic first Hanoverian King George with St George the Dragonslayer raises the question of whether Hawksmoor was just sucking up to royalty, or mocking religion and authority while appearing to celebrate it.

Although changes to Hawksmoor's churches over the centuries disguise the fact, in his designs there is not a single Christian image: no crosses, saints, or angels. But there are lots of *pagan* motifs, and imagery associated with mortality – urns, pyramids, tombs, or Roman altars as at St Alphege, Greenwich and St George's-in-the-East. Next to St Anne's Limehouse is a narrow pyramid which for some unknown reason Hawksmoor placed there: it looks as though it should be a monument or tomb, but it has no purpose as far as anyone knows. Hawksmoor never mentions God in his letters, whether describing his illnesses ('Gout gout gout') or writing to the Dean of Westminster, or other clergy for whom he's doing work on cathedrals and churches. This is very unusual for a pious age. What did he really believe?

### *III. Sclater Street*

In the story of Nicholas Hawksmoor, what didn't happen is as significant as what did. Here is the site of a church proposed to be built under the funding scheme for new places of worship called Queen Anne's Bounty, in what was then the Hare Field; Hawksmoor drew up designs for it in 1711, he started to supervise the clearing of the site, but it never got under way. He was hugely impatient with the way planning and construction worked in London, especially (as was Christopher Wren) with how the City authorities decided to replicate the medieval street plan after the Great Fire in 1666, instead of creating a modern, more European city with broad streets, piazzas and squares, and grand civic buildings. He wrote,

We have no city, nor streets, nor houses, but a chaos of dirty rotten sheds, always tumbling or taking fire, with winding crooked passages, lakes of mud, and rills of stinking mire running through them ... An ugly, inconvenient, self-destroying, unwieldy Monster.

So one of the rather un-Gothic aspects of Hawksmoor's personality and work is his desire to create *order*. He continually generated designs for what amounted to a new vision of England, which were always rejected. His plans

for rebuilding the university towns of Oxford and Cambridge would have transformed them into Roman cities with great squares, triumphal arches, obelisks and classical public buildings. But his grandest scheme of all was for Greenwich, where he had redesigned the church of St Alphege. Hawksmoor was Assistant Surveyor of the Royal Estate in Greenwich between 1705 and 1729, and also Clerk of Works until 1733. It was an awkward site because of the road running through the estate and the Queen's House right in the middle of it: Hawksmoor wanted to convert it into the most stupendous collection of buildings in the country, concentrated on an enormous domed chapel with an oval colonnade in front of it. You might think which other European capital has an enormous domed chapel with an oval colonnade in front of it at its centre ... If Hawksmoor had had his way, Greenwich would have become an English version of the Vatican, or perhaps Versailles, and would outdo either, bringing religion, the military, the monarchy and science together in one place.

But none of it ever happened. Hawksmoor's design for Greenwich would have been colossally expensive and cost more money than the English State had available. In 1733 he was still proposing a scheme to redesign Whitehall and the Government offices around it, but that too was too bold, too radical, and too pricey. Nobody would pay for his enormous ambitions.

#### *IV. Broadgate*

You will look in vain for any of Hawksmoor's buildings here! Although to be fair you will look in vain for many of them. His very first solo design, for instance, the Christ's Hospital Writing School in Newgate which he produced in 1692, is gone: drawings show that it was a strikingly simple and straightforward structure, very different from his later buildings. Some of his other commissions include the manor house at Easton Weston in Northamptonshire; the work he did as assistant to Vanburgh at Blenheim Palace; the towers of All Souls College in Oxford and the Clarendon Building there; the towers of Westminster Abbey, and an obelisk at Ripon.

He worked again with Vanburgh at Castle Howard in Yorkshire between 1699 and 1726, and one of the buildings there he was solely responsible for was the Mausoleum, the first free-standing tomb built since the days of the Roman Empire. Like Hawksmoor's churches, it had no Christian imagery about it at all, and looked entirely pagan, a great drum ringed with pillars. Critics said

[illegible]

Unlike the gentlemanly amateurs Wren and Vanburgh, Hawksmoor was a professional architect who earned his living from his work, but he still fought his corner, defending his buildings against his critics. He was a Freemason, but then so was almost every other architect, Freemasonry at that time operating more like a trade union for the building industry than a secret society. That wasn't mysterious – but other things about Hawksmoor are.

## V. *St Michael's Church, Cornhill*

Although we're thinking about the Gothic elements of Hawksmoor's life and work, his relationship with Gothic as a *style* is ambiguous. The basic element of Gothic, many people would say, is the pointed arch. But this church tower, once you get above the porch (Hawksmoor wasn't responsible for that), although it stands completely within the Gothic tradition, and was his work, doesn't have a single pointed arch on it. So is it Gothic or isn't it?

Hawksmoor certainly wasn't averse to providing a *kind* of Gothic for the churches and other buildings he worked on. That's true of St Mary's Church, Warwick, from 1694; his towers for All Souls College in Oxford; the new towers of Westminster Abbey in 1734; and this church, built between 1718 and 1724. In his obituary, his son-in-law says that one of his greatest and proudest works was his restoration of Beverley Minster in Yorkshire, where he managed to correct one wall that was leaning three feet off true – Horace Walpole said Hawksmoor 'screwed up the fabric by extraordinary art', not meaning that he spoiled it, but set it right. Hawksmoor also drew and had printed a sketch of St Albans Abbey in 1721 to save it, so he said, from being 'martyred by neglect', so he cared deeply about historic buildings.

Yet Hawksmoor's critics claimed that even his buildings in Baroque form were 'Gothic' – using the word not as a technical description of an artistic style, but as an insult. In 1734 James Ralph described Hawksmoor's work as 'mere Gothique heaps of stone without form or order', and Christ Church Spitalfields as 'without doubt the absurdest pile in Europe'. 'Mr Ralph the critick', replied Hawksmoor completely accurately, 'uses the word Gothick to signify everything that displeases him'. The problem he faced was that, like medieval Gothic architecture, Baroque didn't follow any rules, and taste was turning decisively against such unruliness. Hawksmoor wasn't interested in proportion or order, but only in the effect a building produced on the onlooker, hence his experiments with light, shadow, and mass. He wasn't interested, either, in Gothic as a *style*, unlike the later Gothic Revivalists who would never have dreamed of building anything without pointy arches, but you could argue that he *understood* Gothic more than most of them did.

So this is a man of great contradictions. He is a modest man with the grandest of dreams; someone who'd work for anyone but is convinced he's right; a Gothic architect who rarely uses Gothic forms; and a builder of churches who doesn't seem that concerned about the Christian religion. It's a strange and intriguing picture.

## VI. *St Mary Woolnoth*

No building anywhere else in the world looks like this, a kind of Egyptian temple pylon built in Portland stone, and inside virtually a square. There was a medieval church here, burned down in the Great Fire and replaced by Christopher Wren but done so much on the cheap that by 1711 it was already falling down and had to be replaced by the Commission on New Churches. The Commission was set up after the roof of St Alphege Greenwich fell in, and consisted of Wren, Vanburgh, and Thomas Archer, and they appointed Hawksmoor as Surveyor along with William Dickinson, so it was no surprise that he got the contract to design this church and some of the other work that needed to be done as well.

But already by the 1710s things were shifting and Hawksmoor's influence was endangered. This was tangled up in politics. Lord Shaftesbury, the Whig leader and also a theorist on art and taste, wrote a *Letter on Design* in 1712 which attacked the Baroque style and the Tory establishment which he associated with it, most notably the huge expense of Blenheim Palace which had been intended as the nation's gift to the Duke of Marlborough for his victories in the War of Spanish Succession. The Government stopped funding the work at Blenheim in 1712, and in 1716 a fresh Commission on New Churches was appointed full of Whig gentlemen and not a single architect. The new Surveyor was William Benson, described by Hawksmoor in a rare burst of rudeness as 'a man in extreme need of employment disguising himself under the pretext of an architect'. Benson sacked Hawksmoor from his position as Clerk of Works at Whitehall and replaced him with his own brother Benjamin. Benjamin Benson insisted that the House of Lords needed rebuilding, but he was sacked in his turn after an enquiry found that the old building was safer than the scaffolding he'd put up around it.

Hawksmoor found his positions being taken away from him one by one, to be occupied by enthusiasts for the newly-fashionable Palladian architecture who, he felt, were entirely inferior. His buildings were always expensive, and the cost was increased by his habit of working by changing his designs as he went. His last church contracts were carried out in partnership with James Gibbs, partly so that the Commission on New Churches could constrain him and keep costs down. St Giles-in-the-Fields cost a massive £26K, St John Horsleydown and St Luke's Old Street, only £10K each – and Hawksmoor stuck to his original designs for both of those.

In 1736 Hawksmoor died – from ‘gout of the stomach’, whatever that was – and was buried at Shenley in Kent. Sir Nathaniel Lloyd, the jurist, of All Souls College in Oxford, remarked that ‘I reckon now Hawksmooring is all out for this century’; while Horace Walpole said ‘he followed his master [Wren], but by no means surpassed him’. Already by the time of his death Hawksmoor was regarded as a workmanlike, jobbing architect, and not thought of very highly at all as an artist in his own right. Time would change that as critics began to recognise the unique qualities he had brought to his work, but it was also to bring Hawksmoor a strange and different afterlife.

## VII. *Moorgate*

London has had many visionary poets – William Blake, TS Eliot (who included St Mary Woolnoth in *The Waste Land*, as we saw on the Churches walk, see p.18) – and a Welsh-born doctor’s son working as a teacher, labourer, and gardener while scribbling poetry about the side of the city which could only be seen with the imagination, by name of Iain Sinclair.

Mr Sinclair is famed as the inventor of *psychogeography*, the attempt to construct a visionary description of your surroundings by wandering about with no particular aim than following what takes your interest, and building on observation with history, myth and fantasy. He is a man who can describe the A13 as ‘a semi-celestial highway, a lovely corridor of blight which feeds the imagination’, so it’s no surprise that the layered history of London captivated him when he moved to the capital. In 1975 he published *Lud Heat*, and its first chapter is ‘Nicholas Hawksmoor: His Churches’:

The old maps present a skyline dominated by church towers; those horizons were differently punctured, so that the subservience of the grounded eye, and the division of the city by parish, was not disguised. Moving now on an eastern arc the churches of Nicholas Hawksmoor soon invade the consciousness, the charting instinct. Eight churches give us the enclosure, the shape of the fear; - built for early century optimism, erected over a fen of undisclosed horrors, white stones laid upon the mud and dust. In this air certain hungers were activated that have yet to be pacified; no turning back, as Yeats claims: ‘the stones, once set up, traffic with the enemy’.

To give you a couple of clues as to how Sinclair does this, he connects the fact that he has a touch of sunstroke while exploring St Anne's, Limehouse, with the Egyptian scorpion-goddess Selkis, who is linked to the Sun, and so decides that St Anne's is her sanctuary. He has a lovely map of the immediate surroundings of St Anne's in *Lud Heat* including the 'Meths Enclosure' which he thinks is important too. He says that St George's-in-the-East is the focus of the Ratcliff Highway murders, and Christ Church Spitalfields the base of Jack the Ripper. None of this is historical – but creating the personality of a place out of layers and the scraps of things that people can remember *is* the way a city works.

Sinclair insists that Hawksmoor laid out his churches in a deliberate pattern that relates to the 'lines of force' active in London, and that he worked himself into the very position of Surveyor to the Commission on New Churches precisely so that he could do so. Four years before *Lud Heat*, Kerry Downes wrote the first major book on Hawksmoor, so he was beginning to be rediscovered by historians of architecture at the same time as the mythology around him got going. *Lud Heat* is where the legend of 'Hawksmoor the occult architect' begins – but it doesn't end there.

### ***VIII. Bunhill Fields***

The Dissenters' cemetery of Bunhill Fields deserves a visit in itself – Blake is here, and John Milton's tomb is just round the corner. There's no particular Hawksmoor connection, but Iain Sinclair puts it into his map of mystical London, and it's a good spot to see how the final piece in the Hawksmoor puzzle falls into place thanks to historian and novelist Peter Ackroyd. The acknowledgments in his 1985 novel *Hawksmoor* run like this:

Any relation to real people, either living or dead, is entirely coincidental. I have employed many sources in the preparation of *Hawksmoor*, but this version of history is my own invention. I would like to express my obligation to Iain Sinclair's poem, *Lud Heat*, which first drew my attention to the stranger characteristics of the London churches.

In Peter Ackroyd's story, Hawksmoor isn't the name of the architect, but a modern-day detective investigating murders committed around the churches. Hawksmoor himself is transformed into Nicholas Dyer, who we heard from at

the start of the walk. Ackroyd fills the mysterious gaps of Hawksmoor's *real* life with the creation of a psychopathic devil-worshipper.

I shall say only at this point that I, the Builder of Churches, am no Puritan nor Cavaller, nor Reformed, nor Catholick, nor Jew; but of that older Faith which sets them dancing in Black Step Lane. And this is our Creed: He who made the World is also author of Death, nor can we but by doing Evil avoid the rage of evil Spirits. Out of the imperfections of this Creator are procreated divers Evils: as Darknesse from his Feare, shaddowes from his Ignorance, and out of his Teares come forth the Waters of this World. Adam after his Fall was never restor'd to Mercy, and all men are Damned. Sathan is the God of this World and fit to be worshipp'd.

Dyer sees his churches as encoding his Satanic beliefs, and each requires a human sacrifice to consecrate it. These deaths are sometimes accidental, but sometimes Dyer brings them about, his intention being that ever thereafter the churches will draw violence and evil after them. This is an inversion of Iain Sinclair's version of Hawksmoor, who he claims laid his churches on the sullen landscape of London to *defuse* the evil implicit in the earth.

Finally, Alan Moore and Eddie Campbell wrote a graphic novel, *From Hell*, in 1990. Set in Victorian London, this imagines the Ripper murders as an act of ritual magic organised around the occult landscape of the city, including Hawksmoor's churches. *From Hell* became a movie in 2001 and by that time the myth of Hawksmoor the secret devil worshipper was completely engrained. He had become *The Devil's Architect*, and so he remains.

### ***IX. St Luke's Old Street***

This church was one of Hawksmoor's last works, designed in 1733, by which time he was already often ill and confined to bed. It was a collaboration with James Gibbs, and in fact only the tower is Hawksmoor's – but you can see how weird it is, an obelisk stuck on top of a fairly standard church tower for the time, completely out of proportion. At first glance it looks as though there's a cross on the top, but in fact it's a weathervane in the form of a disc with a dragon's head on one side and a fiery comet's tail on the other, not a Christian symbol by any stretch of the imagination. The church was closed in 1964 due

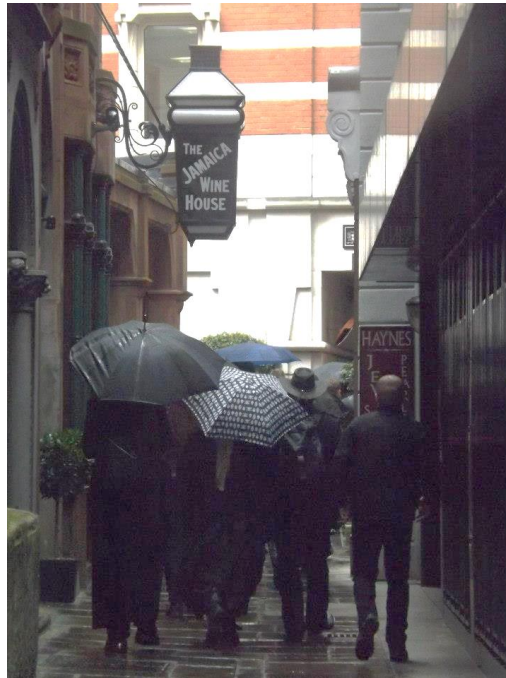
to subsidence and two years later the roof was taken off. It was reopened as a music and arts venue in 2003.

So as we reach the end of our journey, which Nicholas Hawksmoor have we discovered – a learned scholar striving to establish a new architectural vocabulary for the Anglican Church, or an occultist encoding dark and threatening meanings into the buildings he designed? In the absence of anything that might help us decide, you take your pick!

The church of St Botolph in Shenley where Hawksmoor was buried is now deconsecrated, so his tomb stands in what has become a private garden as a somewhat creepy ornament. It is carved with the letters PMSL, probably intended to stand for *Piae Memoriae Sacer Locis* – ‘this place is sacred to pious memory’ – but I *gather* this means something else in modern parlance. He was used to being misunderstood, so he might have appreciated the humour.

We will leave the final word to Iain Sinclair’s *Lud Heat*: ‘his motives remain opaque, his churches are the mediums, filled with the dust of wooden voices’.

*In St Michael’s Alley –  
photo by Mr McHenry*



## 7. Walk 31 - Tell Me Strange Things: the Mystery of Fr Montague Summers, 7 December 2013

In the mid-1920s, so the story goes, a ‘striking and sombre figure ... in black soutane and cloak, with buckled shoes and shovel hat could often have been seen entering or leaving the reading room of the British Museum, carrying a large black portfolio bearing on its side a white label, showing in blood-red capitals, the legend “VAMPIRES”’. This paragraph comes from Fr Brocard Sewell’s biography of that extraordinary personality, Montague Summers. I knew about Summers both from his astonishingly learned but also strikingly weird accounts of witches, werewolves, and revenants, all of them written on the assumption that these phenomena were absolutely real and the Church had done a good day’s work when it burned witches at the stake; and from his invaluable contribution to the history of Gothic literature: he took seriously all those blotchy, cheap sensational novels of a century before when nobody else did. Like Hawksmoor, Summers was a beguiling figure, a clergyman interested in matters no priest had a right to be, whose opening conversational gambit with new acquaintances was always ‘Tell me strange things’. But as I dug into his story to see whether I could make a Walk from it, I found darker topics than I’d bargained for.

We began our walk on a chilly December day at The Chequers in Duke Street, St James’s, and the first place for a convenient introductory talk was outside the White Cube Gallery, just round the corner. The walk was a relatively long one, and it was dark by the time we got to the BM.

### *I. Masons Yard, St James’s*

In 1926, the publisher Kegan Paul produced *The History of Witchcraft and Demonology*. The book produced quite a stir. Its author wrote about it a few years later:

The edition sold out in two or three days. Within less than a week copies were at a premium. Men awoke to the danger still energizing and active in their midst. The evil which many had hardly suspected, deeming it either a mere historical question, long dead and gone, of no interest save to the antiquarian, or else altogether fabled, was shown to be very much alive, potent in politics, potent in society, corrupting the arts, a festering, leprous disease and decay. Men realised that spiritism, so vaunted, so advertised, so mysteriously attractive, so praised and

[illegible]

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wouldn't talk that much about his poem *Antinous*, published in 1907 and denounced by one critic as 'the nadir of corrupt and corrupting literature', or his 1920 article on the Marquis de Sade.

Montague Summers wasn't really a *London* figure; he was present in London mainly during the 1910s and 20s when he lived in Hampstead and moved in literary circles, and spent much longer in Oxford, Hove, and Richmond, which was where he died in 1948. His grave went unmarked for a full forty years until a group of enthusiasts for his work paid for a headstone. So on this Walk we will try to uncover who this curious and very *individual* individual was.

## II. 86 St James's

I originally conceived of speaking about Montague Summers as a way of talking about the occult life of London at the time *without* going on about Aleister Crowley! But there is *some* overlap between these two bizarre figures. This building was one of the headquarters of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, at one time London's main occult organisation, and for more about the G.D. see the next Walk. Summers was never, as far as we know, actually a member of the G.D., though there was a branch in Weston-Super-Mare not far from where he grew up in Bristol. He never had much to do with Aleister Crowley, either, though oddly they both lived in Richmond in Surrey at one point. In 1928 Crowley said to someone who enquired about the matter, 'I haven't seen Montie Summers for years', rather implying that he *had* seen him more often at some point in the past, 'He knows what would happen if he got in my way'. What would happen? the enquirer asked. 'I'd turn him into a toad', replied Crowley. He did actually claim to have turned Summers into, of all animals, a giraffe, but Montie didn't seem to notice and neither did anyone else. Summers rated Crowley's poetry quite highly, which was unusual as very few other people did, but thought little of him as a person: 'one quarter conjuror, three-quarters charlatan, and one whole self-publicist', he said.

To concentrate on Summers himself: in 1926 Kegan Paul the publishers were planning a series of books entitled 'The History of Civilisation', and the editor, Charles Kay Ogden, suggested to Summers that he might write a volume about witches. He already had quite a reputation for learning about such arcane subjects and it's striking that Ogden felt he was the right person to take the job on. He seems to have had his manuscript on witchcraft ready to

go because the full-scale book came out in the same year, and other books followed about *The Vampire: His Kith and Kin* in 1928 and *The Werewolf in Lore and Legend* in 1933. Summers also brought out editions of classic texts related to the occult such as the 15<sup>th</sup>-century witch-hunting manual, the *Malleus Maleficarum*, in 1928. This entailed a lot of work in the Reading Room of the British Museum and the Bodleian Library in Oxford, but Summers also gathered much material on his trips abroad, such as the visits he made to Greece in the early 1900s, coming across texts that no other scholar had ever discovered. Nobody could claim he didn't know his stuff: it was what he did with it that was questionable.

Summers took the view that everything he described was absolutely, undeniably *real*. That witches really did fly to Sabbats on broomsticks and kiss the Devil's backside; that they really did poison wells and blast cattle and curse people with terrible diseases. His 1926 book was expressly written, as we've heard him admit, to alert British society to what he appeared genuinely to believe was a dreadful danger. At the time spiritualists were agitating for the repeal of the Witchcraft Act of 1735 and it may be that Summers's writings – and the way they were translated into popular culture – delayed that happening until 1951. In his introduction to *Witchcraft and Demonology* he wrote

I have endeavoured to show the witch as she really was – an evil liver: a social pest and parasite: the devotee of a loathly and obscene creed: an adept at poisoning, blackmail, and other creeping crimes: a member of a powerful secret organisation inimical to Church and State: a blasphemer in word and deed, swaying the villagers by terror and superstition: a charlatan and a quack sometimes: a bawd: an abortionist: the dark counsellor of lewd court ladies and adulterous gallants: a minister to vice and inconceivable corruption, battenning upon the filth and foulest passions of the age.

So Summers isn't exactly an independent, fair-minded historian. In fact his work is *so* bigoted that one respected Roman Catholic writer at the time, Fr Thurston, declared that Summers was in fact an *agent provocateur*, trying to make Catholicism look ridiculous by adopting the most extreme position possible. It was indeed quite something, even coming from a priest; if, in fact, that's what Montague Summers really was.

### III. *The Criterion Theatre, Piccadilly Circus*

It wasn't actually vampires or the occult that originally made Montague Summers's name, but the study of the theatre. In his autobiography, *The Galanty Show* – the kind of autobiography that doesn't tell you the things you actually want to know! – he devotes twelve pages to describing the toy theatre he had as a child: 'the toy theatre', Montie insisted, 'is not a game, it is a real entertainment'. It created an enthusiasm in him that never went away. As soon as he could, he was going to live performances, and reading plays at home, as a youth in Bristol, a student in Oxford, or a tourist in Italy.

From 1911 to 1926 Summers wasn't just a schoolteacher, but also an incredibly prolific editor and author, often writing about plays and playwrights. He met the Shakespeare scholar AH Bullen who encouraged him to develop his studies of the history of the theatre. Summers went to the Shakespeare Library at Stratford on Avon to consult the plays of the Restoration author William Wycherley, and found them held under lock and key. 'You won't let anyone else see it, will you?' said the librarian anxiously. 'And please hand it back to me personally'. Something so racy was not to be let out of its cabinet lightly.

His introduction to his 1914 edition of the Duke of Buckingham's play *The Rehearsal* marks Summers out as a Romantic who has a preference for strong dramatic stuff:

It [the Restoration] was a time of hot passion and wild gallantry which men did little to disguise or conceal, a time of keen political and fierce religious strife, a time of much genius and much knavery; for all its faults an hour of crowded events, years of full-blooded strife, hate, mistrust, dark shadows and lurid lights, all pregnant with a throbbing vital interest, every detail of which, good and bad, is reflected in the literature, flamboyant mayhap, but virile and strenuous withal, that had its day of favour and applause, before we settle down to the bourgeois classicism and dull decorum of the reign of 'good Queen Anne'.

He was also drawn to the unusual, in 1915 producing the first modern edition of *The Works of Aphra Behn*, the earliest known woman playwright in English.

Finally, in 1919, Summers turned his academic and scholarly interest in the theatre to practical effect: he and a group of friends founded the Phoenix Theatre, originally based in his house in Hampstead. Before it acquired premises of its own, the Phoenix put on performances at the Lyric Theatre in Hammersmith: the very first was Webster's bloody revenge tragedy *The Duchess of Malfi*, and followed it up with John Dryden's comedy *Marriage a la*

*Mode* from a century later. 'For 200 years', Montie congratulated himself, 'everybody has been saying that Dryden's comedies were impossible to stage. We showed them they were wrong'.

The Phoenix only lasted six years and eventually broke up over what to do with amateur actors (Summers couldn't bear them and preferred people to be paid). But he still had more books to write on the theatre, including his two greatest achievements *The Restoration Theatre* and *The Playhouse of Pepys* in 1934-5, which became the standard works on the subject. However, he was no dramatist himself, only ever writing one play: and that was about William Ireland, the Georgian forger who produced fake Shakespeare plays and documents. Somehow that seemed no less than appropriate.

Summers took a great delight attending the theatre, whether performances he'd helped to put on or other peoples', dressed in full clerical gear, cloak, biretta, cassock, buckled shoes and all. It was almost as though he, too, was playing a part ...

#### ***IV. The Church of the Assumption & St Gregory, Warwick Street***

I don't know whether Montague Summers ever found his way to this Roman Catholic church: he usually celebrated Mass privately at home, but sometimes did attend worship elsewhere. If you believe what he says in *The Galanty Show* his family were Catholics, but in fact this wasn't the case, and they were happy to send him to school at the Anglican Clifton College. He studied theology at Oxford with the intention of being ordained an Anglican priest, and was awarded a 4<sup>th</sup>, a degree so bad you basically just had to have signed your name at the top of the paper - it doesn't exist anymore. There was a mysterious gap in his career until 1908 when he was ordained deacon and went as curate to Bitton in Gloucestershire, a rural parish with very little for him to do. His vicar, Canon Ellacombe, was 80 and mainly interested in botany.

Summers was in Bitton for little more than a year: things went wrong and he left. A couple of years later he sought ordination in the Roman Catholic Church, and was ordained deacon in the diocese of Southwark before going to study with a Catholic scholar in Godalming, just round the corner from me, funnily enough. But right at the last minute his bishop refused to ordain him a priest. Yet from about 1913 he began to claim he *was* one, and was very cagey about how this had happened. Now, any fool can dress as a clergyman, I do it all the time, but Summers seemed very serious about his orders, so that raises the question of who had ordained him.

Summers occasionally celebrated Mass in public, in church, when he was on the Continent, but never in the UK. He was challenged now and again to prove the source of his orders, but never came up with convincing proof of what had happened to him. He helped out with the Anglican pilgrimage to Walsingham in Norfolk and remained listed as an Anglican clergyman in *Crockford's Clerical Directory*, either because he never bothered to have the reference taken out, or in order to avoid jury service! When he died, the local Roman Catholic priest refused to say a requiem mass for him, and the Catholic Bishop of Southwark took the trouble to write to the newspapers to say that Summers had never been a Roman Catholic priest. Certainly if he had been ordained to the priesthood at all, it was in a very irregular way.

Yet he had what looks from the outside like a genuine spiritual life. He wrote books about the saints, and diligently prayed through the Office every day in the proper way. And this is from his description of the novel *John Inglesant* by the Quaker author Henry Shorthouse, recalled in *The Galanty Show*:

This book has had an immense influence on my life and thought for at least half a century. I find that Shorthouse has an extraordinary and rare quality of quiet. He does not tell one what to think, but he can bring one into those tranquil byways and harbours where one is aided to think. His words have the soft quality of summer rain, gently falling. It is astonishing that the placid mysticism of this Quaker soul should be so near the Kingdom of God. So near, and yet so far, perhaps a rigid and correct theologian would comment. But it is for the Almighty to measure the space between. There are some mistakes and misapprehensions which call for correction. But there is much, very much that remains. What is it that remains? The Love of God remains. When I read *John Inglesant* I enjoy the peace of a Sunday afternoon, that peace, or a shadow of that peace, which passeth all understanding. Upon a sick-bed, in sorrow and in pain, I have had comfort in *John Inglesant* which few other books can give in quite the same way.

It's this passage as much as anything else that convinces me that Summers, notwithstanding his sins and faults (which we'll come to), was a genuine Christian, because only a believer with a real spiritual life would have bothered to write this, or could have written it.

Yet, Montague Summers was not only a scholar of the occult, religion and the theatre, but also *the* great pioneer student of the Gothic novel.

## V. *All Saints', Margaret Street*

We come here not because Summers would have had anything to do with this Anglican church, but because it's virtually the only Gothic building anywhere in the area!

When we did the Walk as a group, I asked my companions whether any of them were used to reading electronic books such as Kindles, and pointed out that Summers would have viewed them with pity and contempt. He had a love of books not just because of the pleasure of reading or the edifying results of learning, but because of their physicality and presence. Of one volume he reviewed, for instance, he declared 'the type alone is a joy to the eyes'. In *The Galanty Show* he describes a bookstore he used to visit in Bristol:

One shop in particular I recall, because it was especially filthy. Contrary to one's usual experience, for the old fellows who presided over these literary emporia were the friendliest and welcomed one with open arms and cheery greetings, the Methusalem who was lord and master over *this* Augean lair growled almost menacingly upon one's entry and kept up a hoarsely irascible *recitative* all the while one was turning over the myriad volumes of every shape and size which higgledy-piggledy strewn his floor. Tied up in bundles, books even hung from huge hooks in the beams that crossed the smoke-blackened ceiling. At first I was not a little daunted by such a sour reception, but I soon accustomed myself to his churlishness, and searched, serene and undisturbed, while he descanted to himself some saga of sullenness and rooted discontent, rambling half-audibly and slow. I expect that it was rheumatism or lumbar pains that riled him, for his bones must have grined and creaked like rusty iron. His eyes were watery and blear, and his hands when he grasped at one's coins looked like gnarled claws. A bath might have been of signal benefit, for I imagine he had washed neither face nor hands for many a twelvemonth.

But what recked I of dust and dirt? Many a treasure came from the recesses of his den. Not infrequently I was warned, partly in earnest and partly in jest, that I should bring back one fine day a disease (unspecified) from these loathly haunts, or even be lured to destruction by some bookselling Sweeney Todd.

Perhaps Summers got a slight thrill from the idea that going into a bookshop was to risk your life. So he loved books, but Gothic ones in particular. 'Bound in dull black Morocco, gilt-tooled', he wrote, 'Mrs Radcliffe lived on the summit of the highest shelves of our sombre and shadowy old library', and he

claimed he read *The Mysteries of Udolpho* twice a year (I never want to read it again, frankly). Also plays fed his Gothic imagination:

I remember, too, a very macabre full-page engraving of the fearfully impressive scene in the haunted convent in *Robert le Diable*, when at the invocation of the demoniac Bertram, the Abbess Elena and her troop of spectral nuns rise from their accursed tombs to dance in horrid revelry, while the Moon sheds her silvery radiance through the gaping rents in those ivy-clad ruins.

Gothic fiction was still very much looked down on by the literary establishment when Summers delivered a lecture on Anne Radcliffe to the Royal Literary Society in 1916. In 1938 he came out with the first real scholarly examination of the Gothic novel, *The Gothic Quest*. Now, in Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* the heroine Catherine Morland, an excitable teenage devotee of Gothic novels, is recommended six titles to read. Until Summers, everyone assumed they were jokes that Austen had made up: he proved they were real, though he could only chase down five of them, including *Necromancer of the Black Forest*, *The Midnight Bell*, and *Horrid Mysteries*. Summers was working on a new volume, *The Gothic Achievement*, when he died.

He was not just a champion of the famous Gothic novelists, but also writers nobody had heard of, such as Edward Lloyd (*The Skeleton Clutch: or, the Goblet of Gore*), and Mrs Braddon (*Three Times Dead*). Summers was pretty much alone in his opinion that Mrs Braddon was a genius.

Gothic did not remain within the pages of books in Montague Summers's life. He posed as a witchfinder but also hinted that he possessed dark knowledge; he saw ghosts wherever he lived, and took a great delight in telling people about them; and it is a ghost story which comes next.

## **VI. 34 Portland Place**

In 1889 when Montague Summers was still a boy, Thomas Murray, who lived here, acquired an Egyptian mummy case, supposedly made for a priestess of Amun-Ra. From then he was dogged with misfortune, beginning with accidentally shooting himself in the arm and having to have it amputated, and ending with financial ruin. Everyone who handled the mummy case suffered



Certainly, Summers never let the truth spoil a good yarn, and there were elements of his life where truth and fantasy were very different from each other.

## VII. *Whitfield Gardens*

There is nothing to do with Montague Summers here: it's just a convenient place to stop! Summers moved to Oxford in 1929, to Alresford in 1934, Hove in 1938, and finally Richmond in 1939, where he remained. Some acquaintances found him great fun. An actor in the Phoenix stated 'Monty was very popular, a great scholar, with a great sense of humour, and a delightful companion'. The rich and eccentric Mrs Greville-Nugent, who allowed Summers to say Mass in her private chapel until the Bishop of Southwark stopped her, thought he was a saint and greatly wronged, and Dame Sybil Thorndike, who'd performed for the Phoenix Theatre, wrote in the introduction to Fr Sewell's biography of Summers, 'we were very fond of him and we miss him greatly, both as a stimulus and as a good, kind, generous friend'.

But other people detected something sinister in Summers. A Catholic priest in Oxford thought evil spirits were clinging to Summers and sprinkled him with holy water: Monty simply grinned and said, 'Father, had you sprinkled me on consecrated ground, I would have spun!' Having read Dennis Wheatley's novel *The Devil Rides Out* with interest he invited the author and his wife to Wykeham House in Alresford, an experience they found thoroughly unnerving. Mrs Wheatley called attention to a huge toad in the garden which Summers claimed was 'the reincarnation of a dear friend', and they found their bedroom full of huge spiders which they strongly suspected Summers had planted there: when they mentioned them he merely replied 'I like spiders'. Finally Wheatley was shown to Summers's library and when he admired a particular book Summers offered to sell it to him for £50, which was pretty steep in the mid-1930s. Wheatley said he couldn't afford it, whereupon the priest was 'consumed by a demonic fury', flung the book on the floor and left: 'never had I seen a man's expression change so swiftly'. The Wheatleys came up with an excuse to go home. When Summers died in 1948, his companion and secretary Hector Stuart-Forbes left the house in Richmond as soon as he could, claiming it was haunted. The first tenants seem to have felt the same, because they had it exorcised.

Brocard Sewell couldn't find very much material to pad out his biography of Summers – the text only amounts to 90 pages. But he did discover *some* things, which revealed what a conflicted and ambiguous figure his subject was.

Why did he never become an Anglican priest? He only converted to Catholicism some time afterwards, and of course was never properly ordained in the Catholic Church either. Fr Sewell came across a story that the Anglican Bishop of Bristol and the Catholic Bishop of Nottingham had met on a train and began discussing the forthcoming ordinations in their respective dioceses. The Bishop of Nottingham had mentioned the name of one of his more peculiar candidates: 'Did you say *Montague Summers*?' the Bishop of Bristol had asked. And on receiving an affirmative answer told his Catholic counterpart of the deacon he knew in his own diocese who had resigned from his position after being accused of an indecent act with a choirboy. And that was the end of his Catholic career as well. Some sources say that Summers had been vindicated in the Bristol case, but we will never know as the Bristol diocesan papers were destroyed by bombing in World War Two.

And Fr Sewell was told other things as well. Summers's friend John Redwood-Anderson related how he had visited Summers at Bitton during the year he was curate there and found him oddly excited and nervous. He talked about magic and pointed out the vicar's wife's gravestone: Canon Ellacombe had already carved his own predicted date of death on it. Finally Summers asked Redwood-Anderson 'would you like to see a Black Mass?' and implied that he knew where to find one. Several years passed, so Fr Sewell's sources told him, before Summers had tried to perform the rite himself: that took place in his house in Hampstead in 1913, and even Sewell could find out few of the details.

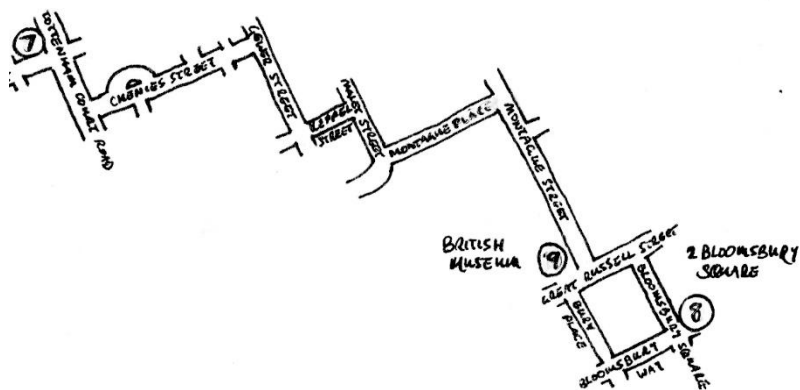
It raised the question – answered in the affirmative by some – of whether Montague Summers had sought holy orders *just so* that he could try to summon up the Devil in a black mass. But if that was the case, that moment seemed to mark a complete turnaround in his attitude. From then on he changed from occultist to witch-finder, as though something had happened to him that night that convinced him he dared tread that road no further.

### ***VIII. 2 Bloomsbury Square***

Just opposite our stopping-place is the building where Summers delivered his 1916 lecture on Anne Radcliffe to the Royal Literary Society. He emerges from all these many varied facets of his life and work as a conflicted figure, impossible to sum up in a few words. After he died in 1948, he faded from memory and for a long time was almost forgotten, notwithstanding Fr Sewell's short biography published in 1965. One of his former pupils recalled

... always a mysterious figure, with his large moon-like face, wearing a black shovel hat and flowing cape, flitting bat-like across the literary

scene of the twenties and thirties; hitting out around him right and left at any who dared hazard a literary opinion contrary to his own. In consequence, there came pouring after him in full pursuit a posse of outraged professors, a hue and cry of booksellers with bills in their hands, and an admiring following of young actors and authors enchanted by his prolific knowledge.



And yet *The Galant Show* remained unpublished until 1980, and until 1988 Summers lacked even a gravestone, resting in an unmarked plot in Richmond Cemetery. Eventually a group of enthusiasts decided to remedy this situation. One strange *contemporary* character claimed involvement in the campaign – Bishop Sean Manchester, the alleged heir of Lord Byron and vampire-hunter, whose feud with David Farrant over the affair of the Highgate Vampire in the early 1970s only ended with Mr Farrant’s death. We have to take care discussing Bishop Manchester, because mention his name online, and, like the Devil, he will pop up! According to him, he not only took part in the effort to commemorate Montague Summers but ran it, an account, it must be said, contradicted by everyone else who was involved in it. Anyway, a headstone was finally unveiled on Montague Summers’s last resting place, engraved appropriately with those importuning words, ‘Tell Me Strange Things’.

Perhaps the greatest mystery that remains about Summers is that of what he actually thought. Did he *really* believe that vampires and werewolves existed; did he *truly* regard witches as devilish conspirators against Western civilisation?

## IX. *The British Museum*

Here, among other places, is where Summers did his research in what was then the Reading Room, now the Great Court.

After Summers's death, his papers were lost. But in 2010 some of them resurfaced in a rare-book shop called Lux Mentis in Portland, Maine. They found their way from there to Georgetown University, and when I first put this walk together in 2012 they were still being catalogued. Now they have been: they include letters from Dennis Wheatley regarding that trying stay in Alresford, notes relating to Aleister Crowley, and unpublished poems. But I don't know that anyone has looked into them very much.

So here he is, this extraordinary person, a man of faith and also of the dark, a sort of patron saint of every divided soul – and aren't we all? And the truth about him finally evades us, which is not so much unlike the rest of us, too.

One final story. In about 1932 the future Fr Brocard Sewell was in Hove and, on a bench not far from the seafront, he saw a figure in a black cloak and a shovel hat, with a small dog at its feet. He recognised it as Montague Summers, accompanied by Cornelius Agrippa, his canine companion named after a famous magician. As Summers rose and moved off, Sewell followed him, trying to pluck up the courage to introduce himself. He trailed Summers into town, a few yards behind him. Summers and Cornelius Agrippa turned a corner and Sewell followed a few seconds later, to be met by the sight of an empty street. There were no doors for Summers to turn into, nowhere he could have hidden. Yet he – and his dog – had, to all appearances, vanished into thin air.



*The twilight British Museum, in the days when visitors could hang around the forecourt*

## 8. Walk 35 – Chasing the Golden Dawn: the Occult Societies of 19<sup>th</sup>- and 20<sup>th</sup>-century London, 17 September 2022

With the departure of the McHenrys to the North the sequence of Goth Walks rather ground to a halt. However, I did plan to do another to celebrate my 50<sup>th</sup> birthday. I remained intrigued by the question of how and why diverse people became interested in the occult, especially the Golden Dawn and its offshoots, and wanted to compose a Walk around that. We were all set to go strolling round London in the Spring of 2020 – and then the covid pandemic intervened. When covid settled down enough to allow the Walk to happen, the next date coincided with the thermometer in London hitting blood temperature. A third was put paid to by rail strikes. So it was with great relief that I finally ran the event, some 2 ½ years later than intended!

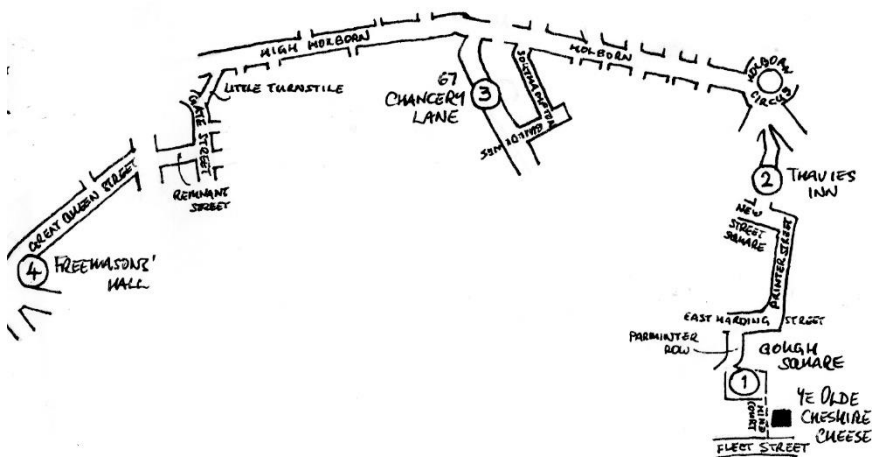
### *I. Gough Square*

This story begins not in London but on a Sussex beach between Bracklesham and Selsey. It's October 1966, and a young Surrey teacher, Judith Hobson, is visiting her parents. They go for a walk along the beach. Suddenly, Judith spots something bobbing in the water: it's a box. She and her father drag it up onto the shore, take it home, and open it. In it they find a newspaper dated 1936, a pair of tongs, a candle holder, a chalice, and a variety of coloured robes; but these aren't Christian ritual objects, because there's also a sword and a dagger, and the robes have pentagrams and other embroidered symbols. Finally there's a plaque that reads EX FIDE FORTIS, 'Out of faith, strength'. The Hobsons take the box to the police in Chichester. Nobody turns up to claim it, and so eventually they take it back – and nobody knows what happened to it after that.

Somehow the *Daily Telegraph* picks up on the story, and publishes it under the title 'Witch's Box Found on Beach'. An accountant from Notting Hill called Francis King reads this and informs the paper that it didn't belong to a witch as such – he knows about these things – but a practitioner of ritual magic. He writes about it in one of his books on the history of magic, and this in turn is read by a gentleman called Israel Regardie. He not only recognises what the objects are, he knows who must have owned them and how they ended up floating in the sea. EX FIDE FORTIS was the magical motto of a lady called Maiya Trenchall-Hayes (though she was christened with the name Mabel!). Mrs Tranchell-Hayes had run a small occult society in Sussex for many years.

She'd been loyal to the founders of the original order into which she'd been initiated, but when Israel Regardie had published all its rituals for just anyone to see, she gave up on magic, and buried all her regalia in her clifftop garden. A cliff-fall had led to the box dropping into the sea and finally washing up for the Hobsons to find.

When I titled this Walk 'The Occult Societies of London', I was a bit misleading. There is really only one, and it's the one Maiya Trenchell-Hayes, Maiya's protegee Dion Fortune, and many others belonged: the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. Its story is one of weird personalities, weird events, and even weirder beliefs.



## II. 26 Thavies Inn

The first proper home of the Golden Dawn (it had many) was here: a 'dirty, noisy and cheaply rented room' where, in 1891, Annie Horniman, the daughter of the founder of the Horniman Museum in Forest Hill, became the first to be initiated using the Vault – a structure decorated with occult symbols which was supposed to represent a tomb, and therefore the mystical death-and-rebirth that members underwent. But to go back a step.

Once upon a time there was the Societas Rosicrucianis In Anglia, founded in 1865 to study *qabalah*, rituals and the like. To be a member of the SRIA you had to be three things: you had to be a Freemason (to quite an advanced degree), you had to be a professing Christian, and you had to be male. But three members, a high-ranking Mason called William Wynn Westcott, a doctor named William Woodman, and a very odd character called Samuel Liddell Mathers, wanted something a bit more radical. They wanted actually

to *use* this occult knowledge practically, and they wanted people who weren't Masons, Christians, or male, to be able to have a go.

In 1887, William Westcott came into the possession of a set of mysterious manuscripts written in a kind of code. These documents, he claimed later, had been brought from Germany by a well-known buyer of esoteric books, Fred Hockley, and passed through a number of hands before he got them, and, for the first time, managed to decode them. The paper has a watermark of 1809 but the texts contain references which mean they can't have been written any earlier than 1870. The documents were basically an outline for a course of occult study – astrology, geomancy, tarot-reading and *qabalah* – and (so Westcott claimed) included the address of one Anna Sprengler, a German countess living somewhere near Nuremberg, who he wrote to. Fraulein Sprengler gave him permission to found a new occult society using the information in these 'Cypher Manuscripts', with himself, Woodman, and Mathers as the three Chiefs, or *Adepti Exempti*. Now, do remember this story, because it comes up later.

So the Golden Dawn came into being in March 1888. Westcott was 40, Mathers was 33; Woodman a bit older at 60; he was the least active and died in 1891. In that first year, there were three Temples of the Order established, all named after ancient Egyptian deities – the Isis-Urania in London, the Horus in Bradford, and the Osiris in (of all places) Weston-super-Mare! From Autumn 1891 there were two elements, the Outer Order which dealt with tarot-reading, scrying, astrology and numerology, and the Inner Order for mystical and magical adepts. The Golden Dawn was never very big – there were about 300 members in 1896 but never more than about 60 were very active, and the Golden Dawn *proper*, before it split, was only in existence for twelve years. And yet it haunts the imagination of the world, I think it's fair to say. It's been hugely influential on the occult movement across the whole world: everything that calls itself occultism now derives from the Golden Dawn in some way.

The Order tended to attract marginal people from the arty middle classes. According to Aleister Crowley – who comes into the story a bit later – most of them were 'muddled mediocrities', but they included people of extraordinary talents. Whether they used those talents to their best abilities is another matter!

### III. 67 Chancery Lane

Upstairs at no.67 is one of Aleister Crowley's homes, though you will notice there is no blue plaque here. Crowley didn't think much of any of the G.D. members, with the one exception of Alan Bennett (not *that* one) who was responsible for him joining and who he regarded as a genuine and powerful magician. He claimed to have seen Bennett 'blast' a sceptic who took 14 hours to recover from the attack. He was equally fascinated when Bennett gave up magic to become a Buddhist monk – but, Crowley noted, he kept his wand, which seemed to be a glass rod from a chandelier. Bennett stayed here with Crowley and trained him in various magical techniques and the mystical use of intoxicating drugs.

All sorts of people are *claimed* to have been members of the G.D.: WB Yeats and the writer Arthur Machen definitely were; Constance Wilde, Oscar's wife, was; Sax Rohmer, probably not; Bram Stoker, *certainly* not; and you'll often come across suggestions that E Nesbit was, but she doesn't appear in the membership lists (not that they're exhaustive). But, as I say, members were generally middle-class, arty and there was often something marginal about them – a high proportion of them had parents who had died young, that sort of thing. There were not many aristocrats and virtually no working-class people at all: they didn't have the time.

Arthur Conan Doyle, who of course was interested in quite a lot of esoteric subjects, said that a friend, Dr Burry, and Richard Felkin, tried to recruit him into the G.D. in about 1898. His interest was piqued when Burry told him he had a secret room in his house that nobody could go in as it was used for 'mystic purposes', and then he had a dream in which the two doctors appeared. When he related this to Burry, Burry said, 'Ah, we were astrally projecting to check whether you were suitable to join' but Conan Doyle did not become a member. You do wonder what they were checking – whether he snored?

Ithell Colquhoun said William Westcott was 'a darling old pussycat of a man' (he was only 44 in 1892) 'and if he could avoid saying boo to a goose, he would'. Westcott was another doctor who became a coroner, so had a responsible job, but even if he was a shy and retiring sort, his fellow-founder of the G.D., Samuel Mathers, was a very different character.

Not much is known about the early life of Samuel Liddell Mathers (not much is known about his later life, as a matter of fact). His father died when he was a boy; he seems to have attended Bedford School though there's some doubt about that; and he lived with his mother in Bournemouth where he worked as a clerk and became a Freemason. He must have studied hard because the G.D. rites he drew up required a good knowledge of French, Latin and Greek, and

some acquaintance with Hebrew and Coptic. After his mother died and he moved to London, Westcott seems to have put him up in lodgings in Islington, before he got a job as assistant to Annie Horniman's father at the Horniman Museum. Although Mathers was in a sort of middle class job, he was dreadfully poor and was never anything else.

Mathers was, it's not unfair to say, a bit of a fantasist. He added his middle name *MacGregor* because he became convinced, with no evidence at all, that he was descended from Highland Scots aristocracy and sometimes presented himself as 'Count MacGregor of Glenstrae'. When he got together with Mina Bergson he persuaded her to change her name to Moina because he thought it sounded more Celtic. One of the very few photographs of Mathers shows him wearing the uniform of a Lieutenant in the Hampshire Volunteer Regiment when he was never actually commissioned, so he wasn't entitled to it. In Paris they called him 'the mad Englishman'. But some of the weirdest and most damning stories about Mathers were spread by Aleister Crowley, so you have to take them not just with a pinch of salt but a whole box. Among these tall tales were:

Mathers used to baptize dried peas with the names of his enemies and then shake them around in a sieve to cause disagreements;

Mathers killed Crowley's dogs at his Scottish home by magic – not very likely as Mathers was a very strong vegetarian and anti-vivisectionist;

Mathers devised the game of Astral Chess (which is true) and then played it with himself, pretending to be a spirit on every other turn. Crowley describes Mathers moving a piece, getting up and going to the other side of the board, and then sitting and frowning in concentration as he considered his next move.

WB Yeats considered that Mathers was immensely learned in occult matters and the G.D. could never have managed without him, but that he had no critical faculties. He accepted everything that came his way, was completely credulous and very easy to deceive – as we shall see.

#### *IV. Masons' Hall*

As we mentioned, the G.D. grew out of English Freemasonry; this is the third building on this site, built in 1927.

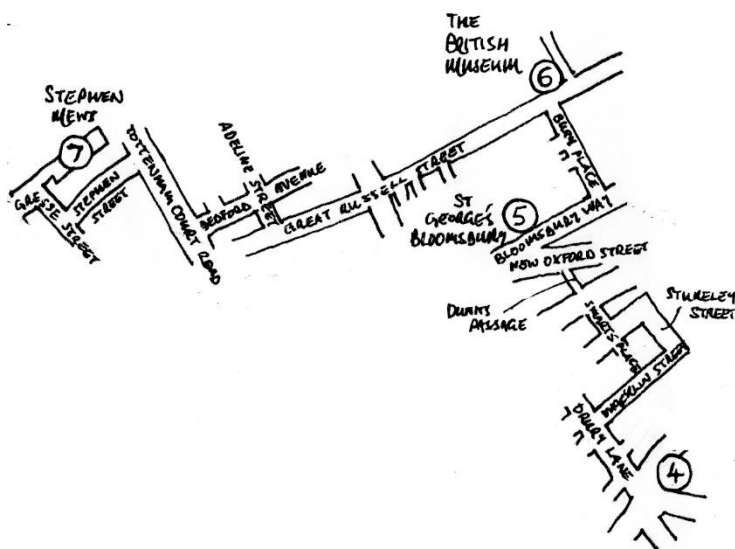
Unusually among occult societies – or indeed any others in late-Victorian Britain – the G.D. admitted women on a completely equal footing with men. We’ve already mentioned a couple. Among them Annie Horniman was crucial because she basically bankrolled a lot of the Order’s activities (or at least the Matherses’). Her own money came from her father Frederick who was a tea merchant and founded the Horniman Museum in Forest Hill. Her parents deeply disapproved of theatre but she was hooked by the stage when she was 14 after her German governess illicitly took her to see *The Merchant of Venice* at the Crystal Palace. She did well at the Slade School of Art but didn’t take that side of her talents forward, concentrating on the theatre. She founded the Abbey Theatre in Dublin and the Gaiety in Manchester, and funded plays by WB Yeats and George Bernard Shaw. She ‘openly smoked and wore exotic clothing’ whatever that meant, and cycled across the Alps twice. In later life was made a Companion of Honour – she and Algernon Blackwood are the only members of occult societies to have received UK honours – *as far as we know*. Annie became friends with Moina Mathers (or Mina Bergson as she then was) at the Slade and managed to get Samuel Mathers his job as assistant to her father probably in order to save Moina from the lifetime of penury she foresaw ahead of her. If so, it was a plea that failed because Mr Horniman and Mathers couldn’t get on.

In the end Mathers would expel Annie from the Order in 1896 but she still kept sending the Matherses money in Paris – ostensibly it was for Moina, but it supported them both.

One of the young actors Annie Horniman promoted was called Florence Farr. An ardent feminist and student of the occult, she was another friend of WB Yeats who initiated her into the G.D. in 1890. She learned enough to be made Chief Adept of the Order by Mathers after William Westcott resigned – Mathers was living in Paris so she was effectively the head of the Order in the UK, which some members didn’t like at all. It was her letter to Mathers offering to resign in 1900 which began the process of the whole enterprise breaking up – but we’ll come to that later.

There were lots of others. But for now we’ll finish with possibly the most important woman in the G.D., Moina Mathers, born as Mina Bergson, sister of the French philosopher Henri Bergson. She went to the Slade School at 15 where she met Annie Horniman, and there is *some* suggestion that ‘Bergie’ and ‘Tabbie’, as they were known, were romantically involved; that certainly fits in with the way Annie behaved towards Moina, but they may not have recognised the truth themselves. Then in 1887 Moina met Mathers apparently in the Egyptian Hall of the British Museum. Ithell Colquhoun says in *The Sword of Wisdom*: ‘was it under the burning gaze of that enthroned black

marble Sekhmet, a lioness of the sun still instinct with vibrant force, that they first exchanged incendiary glances?’ This all sounds very sexy but the odd thing was that Moina made it completely clear to Mathers that she had no intention of ever having sex with him. She viewed the physical side of human relations as ‘beastly’, and probably neither of them was that interested because he doesn’t seem to have minded either. They were married at Chacombe church in Northamptonshire by Revd William Ayton (a G.D. member who we’ll talk about soon). Although they had a non-physical relationship it’s clear Moina and Mathers were devoted to each other. They tended to work together, Mathers evoking spirits and Moina putting what he ‘evoked’ into artistic form. Her motto in the Order was *Vestigia Nulla Retrorsum* or ‘Prudence never retraces its steps’, which gives you an idea of her personality. Certainly after Mathers’s death she fiercely defended his reputation and her own position as his heir.



## V. St George's Bloomsbury

I once read a thesis on the G.D. and the Anglo-Catholic movement which claimed that in 1939 the Anglican bishops issued a warning that no ordained person was to belong to an occult society. You wouldn't have thought that needed saying, but for a long time it did. There were many people of ostensibly Christian beliefs involved in the G.D., and even clergy.

One of these was the man who married the Matherses, Revd William Ayton, who WB Yeats described as ‘an old white-haired clergyman, the most panic-stricken person I have ever known’. Ayton had been a Freemason and was one

of the G.D.'s oldest members, being 72 when he joined. He told WB Yeats the following:

I have an alchemical laboratory in my cellar where the Bishop cannot see it. One day I was walking up and down when I heard another footstep walking up and down beside me. I turned and saw a girl I had been in love with when I was a young man, but she died long ago. She wanted me to kiss her. Oh no, I would not do that – she might have got power over me!

Yeats then asked whether Ayton's alchemical experiments had been successful.

Oh yes, I once made the Elixir of Life. A French alchemist said it had the right smell and the right colour, but the first effect is that your nails fall out and then your hair falls off. I was afraid I might have made a mistake, so I put it away on a shelf. I meant to try it when I was an old man, but when I got it down the other day, it had all dried up!

Ayton developed the odd idea that almost everyone was a spy working for the Jesuits. He thought Mathers was one (hence falling out with him later on), and so was Yeats. So were both Gladstone and Disraeli.

Well, Ayton was an oddball even within the G.D., but there were plenty of members who thought of themselves as Christians even as they dressed in coloured robes and waved wands about invoking Isis and the Spirits. After the split in the G.D. one of its offshoots, the Stella Matutina run by Richard Felkin, became explicitly Christian. Francis King, one of the leading writers on Western magic, always maintained that there was a link between the SM and the founders of the Guild of St Raphael, which still exists today and is the main Church of England organisation promoting the ministry of healing. For a long time this was just a rumour, but research in the last 10 years has shown that this was absolutely true. For instance there were several monks at the Community of the Resurrection in Yorkshire who were members of the SM and one, Fr Fitzgerald, helped to set up the Guild. One became a bishop, one a cathedral dean. At that time, around the 1920s, just like the G.D., the SM expected its members to make magical equipment and take exams. Now if you're a monk living in a monastery you can't keep that kind of thing secret, so the Abbot at the time, Walter Frere, who became Bishop of Truro, must have known what they were doing. The SM eventually had a branch in NZ which lasted until the 1970s, and its membership included several Anglican bishops who joined *while they were bishops*, which is quite something.

But there were darker moments. In 1919 two of the priest members of the SM tried to use the 'Triangle Ritual' to raise Miss Christina Stoddart to the rank of Magus. This took place in a church – unknown – but during the course of the ceremony she became increasingly uncomfortable and eventually stopped it, describing the whole process as 'evil'. She started to dig into the history of the Order, and then the esoteric movement in general, and finally in 1930 produced a book called *Light Bearers of Darkness* in which she concluded that the whole thing including Freemasonry, the G.D., the SM, and all, were a Jewish plot to take over the world.

Alchemy, wands, Triangle Rituals – what was being a member of the G.D. actually like? What did they *do*? The British Museum, where Mathers did so much of his research, is a suitable place to find out.

## **VI. The British Museum**

Almost everyone who was anyone in mid- and late-Victorian intellectual life found their way through the Reading Room of the BM, including Karl Marx of course, and Samuel Mathers; and as we've heard he and Mina Bergson met each other in the Egyptian Hall. It is rumoured that there was a special G.D. lodge run by the great Keeper of Egyptian Antiquities, Wallis Budge; and the Reading Room was where Arthur Machen met Dr Waite. Even years later, it was, Machen said, 'impregnated with the residue of G.D. encounters'. Round the corner from here for 5 years until 1924 8 Gilbert Place was the home of one of the most talented artists associated with the occult world in London, Austin Osman Spare. But he wasn't a joiner of groups. He was initiated into the A.A but fell out with Aleister Crowley and concluded that ritual magic was nonsense. Nevertheless the artist Kenneth Grant claimed he joined a Chinese sect that worshipped a snake-goddess in Stockwell (where else?). *Was* it all nonsense? What were G.D. members actually supposed to *do*?

After the original Order collapsed, it was said, a Lord and Lady Astor ran a 'Golden Dawn Society' in 'an elegant house in Eaton Square – its members were more interested in flagellation than in Magic', and when one former G.D. member sued the Marquis of Townsend in 1905 the court was told about 'initiation rites involving ten virgins in the flimsiest silks'. It wasn't, I'm afraid, like that at all!

When Arthur Waite joined in 1891, he recalled that he told his wife 'I was engaged on a dark errand of which nothing could be declared or hinted so if I failed to return she must communicate with Scotland Yard', but when he actually arrived 'I met with nothing worse than a confounding medley of

occult symbols, drawn at haphazard from familiar sources ... it was nothing other than public knowledge, and the rituals were nothing that could not be safely experienced by any respectable middle-class lady'. The initiation ritual itself, which involved being shut in the symbolic tomb called the Vault, which every G.D. temple was supposed to have, and being asked questions, was presumably quite dramatic and impressive, like being baptised in the Christian tradition. And then once you'd done that, you were supposed to keep studying and developing, seeking mystical experience, and think about your own personality, and how it related to these occult powers you were dealing with. Just like being a Freemason, there was a sequence of steps you were supposed to advance to: you were supposed to learn the data, make your own ritual kit, and have it checked. So for instance this is the G.D.'s 'Part 1 F' after initiation: 'Angelic Tables. Receive and make copies of the Enochian Tables, the Ritual of the Concourse of the Forces, and the Ritual for Making the Pyramid, the Sphinx, and the God-form for any Square. A written examination on these subjects may be taken'. If you'd come looking for virgins in flimsy silks you'd be sadly disappointed.

Designing your Sigil was one exercise: Annie Horniman's was written on yellow paper, an octogram with a diamond and caduceus, 'designed to attract currents from the planet Mercury and the Sephirah *Hod*, as beneficial to enterprises involving literature and public relations'. Annie was rewarded, it seemed, with visions of angels: 'I made the sign and called on the Names and begged to be allowed to see the Angel. She appeared with a blue lunar crescent on her head and brown hair which was very long. Her robe was pale blue with a black border, and a pentagram in red on her breast. Her wings were blue also, and so was the Cup in her left hand, with her right hand she bore a red torch. Around her was a diamond of red *Yods* (a Hebrew letter). She told me her office was "change and purification through suffering"'.

All this was supposed to have an effect, an effect on the practitioner and on the world. You were supposed to become a better human being, and actually do some good as well. Once Annie Horniman and another G.D. member, Teresa O'Connell, corresponded over the son of a friend, a little boy called Charlie Sovell who suffered from epilepsy, and whether they could do anything for him with magic. Annie – she says – 'went through the Golden Hexagram and Red Cross to a seated white figure', showed it the child in her imagination, and received instructions for making certain talismanic charms which Mathers interpreted for her. It's not recorded whether little Charlie actually got any better, but at least they were trying. Many years later, that Mathers loyalist Ithell Colquhoun wrote that 'if oaths had been kept and growth allowed to proceed, a powerful network might by now have permeated the whole of Europe and the Americas, to the benefit of this tattered, battered, and

deeply scarred planet'. That was the ultimate aim, a better world. John Brodie-Innes, a Scottish lawyer who ended up running the Edinburgh Temple, said 'I could not be without one atom of the teaching I have had, nor do I regret an hour I spent'.

But it was inevitable that these ideals were sometimes strained. In the 1890s the leaders of the Bradford Temple reported to Mathers that: a Mr Frith was refusing to wear a sash that he believed was too much like a Masonic one; a Col Olcott 'showed a rebellious wish to pick and choose his objects of study', and a Mr Harrison dared to sit *in the wrong place for his grade*. They were the kind of petty squabbles you might expect in any organisation. It would get much worse than that.

## VII. Stephen Mews

I'm sure there must have been a reason why I wanted to come here, that someone connected with the G.D. had a studio nearby, but if so, I lost it by the time the Walk happened. It may have been just a place to stop off the street!

But Fitzrovia is the heart of G.D. land in the period we're talking about. The Fitzroy Tavern is Aleister Crowley's pub where he allegedly invented a cocktail including laudanum, the Matherses' awful little apartment in Great Percy Street was just around the corner, Moina Mathers had her studio in Fitzroy Street (WB Yeats was initiated into the Order there), and 88 Charlotte Street was the studio of Althea Gyles, another woman artist member who's somewhat unfairly best known for giving Crowley the brush-off – so we could have done an entire walk in the half-mile around the BT Tower.

You may remember that William Westcott said when the G.D. was founded that he'd made contact with Anna Sprengler, a German countess and occultist whose address was in the Cypher Manuscripts: she, in turn, was in touch with the shadowy Secret Chiefs whose esoteric knowledge was contained in the manuscripts. Then in 1890 Westcott announced to the Order that Fraulein Sprengler had died and so any further contact with the Secret Chiefs would have to be made separately – not that he showed any interest in doing so. Two years later Mathers declared that *he* had made contact with the Secret Chiefs and that he and Moina were regularly communicating with them psychically. Mathers published a Manifesto which he distributed around the membership describing how he and Moina sometimes heard a physical voice speaking to them, and at other times they received mental impressions and visions. It was, he said, a terrible strain, and demons were attacking them to stop these sublime truths being communicated to humankind, attacks that gave the

couple nosebleeds. ‘The Secret Chiefs’, Mathers wrote, ‘are human and living upon this earth, but possess terrible superhuman powers’. Some G.D. members thought this was a bit weird, and some – given that Mathers was not just something of an oddity but increasingly imperious and difficult to get on with – began wondering why *they* couldn’t contact the Secret Chiefs for themselves.

In 1896 William Westcott left the G.D.. The rumour got about that he’d left a folder of occult papers with his name on it in a cab and was told in no uncertain terms that such interests were incompatible with the public role of a coroner. That left Mathers in overall control of the Order, even though he and Moina were living in Paris by then.

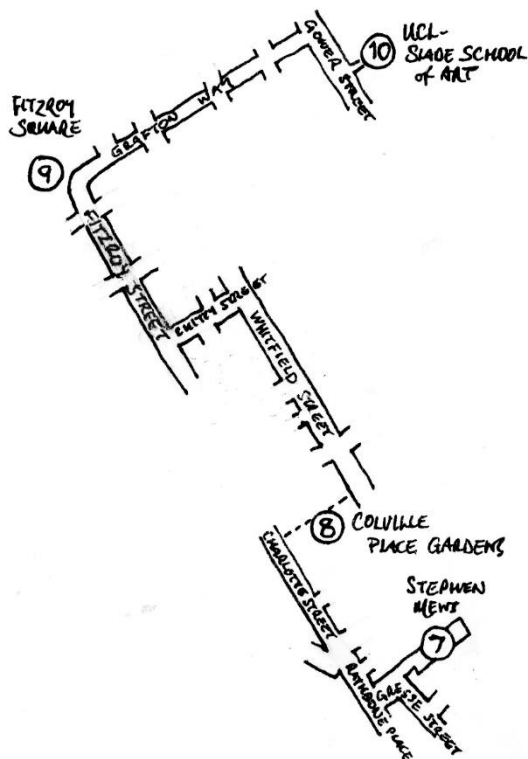
At some time, probably in 1899, Aleister Crowley joined the G.D. and made his way swiftly through the different grades. However, when he presented himself for initiation into the Second Order, Florence Farr and the other directors of the Isis-Urania Temple in London, not liking what they’d heard about him, refused. In high dudgeon Crowley made his way to Paris early in 1900 where the Matherses gave him a completely different reception. Samuel Mathers thought he was a promising young man, and admitted him into the Inner Order of adepts with no hesitation. He must also not have been unaware that Crowley had a bit of money behind him, which the Matherses were always short of. When Crowley returned to London brandishing his new credentials, Florence Farr was horrified and wrote to Mathers to protest. Mathers accused her of trying to reinstate Westcott as head of the Order. She then wrote back to resign. The reply Mathers sent to that, refusing her resignation, left her, and the other officials of the London Temple, reeling.

In his letter, Mathers alleged that William Westcott had been a fraud and that he had known all along; that Anna Sprengler had never existed; that the Cypher Manuscripts were made-up; and that everything the G.D. had done until he, Mathers, had written the new rituals and ceremonies in 1892 had been nonsense; that he, and only he, had any genuine esoteric knowledge; and that any challenge to him would be rebellion against the Secret Chiefs and would attract the direst magical penalties. While Florence Farr, WB Yeats and the other London officials tried to work out the truth in all this, Mathers authorized Crowley to seize the Vault and other Golden Dawn property being held at the Temple, then based in Hammersmith. What happened next became known as the Battle of Blythe Road, and there are two main accounts: Aleister Crowley’s, and everyone else’s.

Everyone agrees that WB Yeats, forewarned that Crowley would turn up, occupied the building on Blythe Road with another G.D. member, Mr Hunter,

‘a pugilist’ and so a handy person to have on your side in these circumstances. On the night of April 19<sup>th</sup> 1900 they saw Crowley storming up the road ‘in Highland dress, a black mask on his face, a plaid thrown over his head and shoulders, an enormous gold cross on his breast, and a dagger at his side.’ According to Crowley he had ‘astrally besieged’ the defenders of 36 Blythe Road and then cast dreadful spells causing them to cower, and he was only ejected with the aid of the police (who seemed to be strangely unaffected by magic). According to everyone *else* he pointed a wand at Yeats and Hunter and gabbled Latin at them, whereupon they kicked him down the stairs. Thus bested, he took the Temple to court on Mathers’s behalf, and lost because they’d paid the rent on the building, and also because Annie Horniman hired an expensive barrister. And thus the G.D. began to fall apart.

This was all humiliating enough for a secret order supposedly dedicated to the betterment of humankind. But worse was to come in the Trial of Madam Horos.



## VIII. Colville Place

She was not, as she claimed to be, the love-child of King Ludwig of Bavaria and Lola Montez. She was not the Princess Editha Lolita. She was not Veva Ananda. She was not many of the things she said. She was, in fact, Ann O'Delia Diss Debar of Harrodsburg, Kentucky (probably). But when she and her husband Frank Jackson arrived in London, she was calling herself the Swami Laura Horos and *his* name was Theodore, supposedly her son. By then she'd been in prison at least twice for fraud, and had had a wealthy earlier husband who died remarkably soon

after their marriage. Early in 1900 they popped over to Paris where Diss Debar managed to convince Samuel Mathers that *she* was the mysterious Countess Anna Sprengler. To be fair, he can only have believed this for a very short time because by February, as we've seen, he was telling Florence Farr that Anna Sprengler had never existed, but he accepted it long enough to admit both the Jacksons as members of his Temple and give them all the G.D. ritual handbooks, which they took back to London and used to set up their own esoteric establishment, called the Theocratic Unity Temple, near Regent's Park.

For the time being, Mathers and his G.D. opponents at the London Temple were completely taken up with the contest over who owned the Order's kit at Blythe Road, but this was to change after the Jacksons were arrested in September 1901 and put on trial at the Old Bailey. Diss Debar elected to defend herself in court, despite having no legal experience whatever; the prosecution was led by Sir Edward Carson – the Solicitor General. It was a bit unequal. But not even the best lawyer could have got the defendants off the charges. Very quickly the depths of their horrible fraud became clear. The couple would advertise in regional newspapers to the effect that a 'foreign gentleman of independent means' was looking for a wife, entice a variety of suitable young women down to London, take them to their rented house in Gower Street (so just round the corner from here) and there begin to brainwash them, convincing them that Frank-stroke-Theodore was Jesus and they were to be his Bride. The 'betrothal' invariably consisted of rape and the theft of valuables. The star witness was one Daisy Ward who was only 16 and so terrified that Diss Debar would put a spell on her that she stood facing the judge and refusing to look in her direction. The jury was out for five minutes, and Frank Jackson was sentenced to 15 years while Diss Debar went to Aylesbury Prison for seven. She was let out on parole in 1906 and promptly ran away, conning someone in Kent out of £400 by claiming to be the sister of the banker JP Morgan and calling herself 'Mother Elinor'. Thankfully at that point she passes out of our story.

For the G.D., the sensational and appalling Horos Trial was a disaster. The initiation rituals the Jacksons' victims had to undergo were clearly drawn from the Order's own, the name 'Golden Dawn' was mentioned in the oaths they had to take, and Samuel Mathers was repeatedly cited in documents Diss Debar had. Who is this person, the court wanted to know? 'He is a traitor, a sworn enemy of the British Empire, who dare not show himself on English soil', fumed Diss Debar. The court quickly worked out that Mathers was another of her dupes and not to blame in any way, but as a result of the trial a supposedly secret order a lot of whose appeal *depended* on its secrecy became common knowledge. It was in the papers. Everyone knew it existed, everyone

knew what it did, and everyone knew it was run by a man who wasn't the world's greatest critical thinker. William Peck, City Astronomer of Edinburgh, resigned and burned all his ritual kit. Edmund Berridge, the only senior G.D. adept still loyal to Mathers, wrote that the fraudsters would 'suffer the terrible vengeance of the Secret Chiefs', though that begged the rather big question of why the Secret Chiefs hadn't warned Mathers in the first place. For those who opposed him, the whole incident provided yet more evidence of the flaws in their former Supreme Magus's character.

## ***IX. Fitzroy Square***

Even before 'Madam Horos' went on trial at the Old Bailey late in 1901, the G.D. was splintering in a variety of different directions. We are not going to go into it in huge detail because you won't remember it and there's no need to know it all anyway! Very basically, what happens is this.

The Second Order committee in charge of the London Temple, including WB Yeats and Florence Farr, regard themselves as the legitimate G.D., but after Farr resigned in the wake of the Horos Trial they renamed themselves the Hermetic Society of the Morgenrothe (which essentially means the same as Golden Dawn). This then split into two within a year – the members who were more interested in Christian mysticism were gathered by Arthur Waite under the name of the Independent & Rectified Rite of the Golden Dawn, while Richard Felkin and the members who wanted to keep some elements of practical magic formed the Stella Matutina, the Star of the Morning (which, you will notice, *also* essentially means the same as 'Golden Dawn'). The Horus Temple in Bradford moved back towards the SRIA, which you might remember is part of the Freemasons, and was still run by William Westcott. It took a few years before Aleister Crowley established his own magical society, the A.A. Finally the groups loyal to Mathers, in London and elsewhere, took on the name Alpha et Omega. Remember that these all involved very small groups of people, and individuals often moved from group to group. It was probably even more confusing at the time than it is for us.

There was a lot of bitterness and anger. Accusations of astral attack were thrown about in one direction and another. Dr Berridge believed that Annie Horniman had tried to injure him by magic, so he 'invoked the aid of the arch-natural powers' against her: 'the enemy' he declared, 'was occultly rushed, followed by a great disaster on the material plane' though it isn't clear that anything much happened to her at all.

Gradually the new groups began to pull away from the legacy of the G.D. and go in their own directions. Arthur Waite began studying the Cypher Manuscripts and concluded, to the horror of some of his members, that they couldn't embody genuine Ancient Egyptian traditions at all: he began devising his own rituals for the Independent Rite, whereon many members left because his stuff was so long-winded and dull. Robert Felkin of the Stella Matutina, in contrast, was convinced that Anna Sprengler was still alive in Germany and spent months searching for her. He didn't find her, but he did come across a mystic teacher called Sri Parananda, who he first saw materializing from the steam in the baths at a German spa and then met in the lounge of the Carlton Hotel in London, exactly the sort of place to encounter a mystical swami. Felkin believed he had contacted the Secret Chiefs though the Matherses were adamant they couldn't be the *real* Secret Chiefs.

Meanwhile the Matherses themselves were in a dreadful state in Paris. In the 1890s they'd had some success with their dramatic presentations, the 'Rites of Isis', which claimed to present ancient Egyptian rituals and were staged at the Theatre Bodiniere. Those who fancied themselves as avant-garde artistic types thought quite highly of the show, but soon it was yesterday's news. Aleister Crowley claimed to have met the Matherses in 1903 and said Moina was 'thickly plastered to the eyes above a neck that could not have been washed for months', and implied that she was on the streets to make some money – but of course that's a typically nasty Crowley story. In 1910 Mathers took Crowley to court over his use of G.D. material, and though he won, didn't have the money to contest Crowley's appeal and so lost that by default. By the First World War things were a bit better with the establishment of some new Alpha et Omega temples and the arrival of fees from their members, but Mathers and Moina were still desperately hard up.

Rather fittingly, we don't even know how Mathers died. His death certificate is in the Parisian archives but doesn't give a date – it was either 5<sup>th</sup> or 20<sup>th</sup> November 1918 – nor a cause. Some accounts have him as the victim of a motor accident; Moina claimed Crowley had attacked her husband by magic. The most likely cause was the Spanish flu.

The following year, Moina came back to London to preside over the Alpha et Omega Temple there, and to defend her and her husband's legacy, which she did with enthusiasm, nay ferocity. In 1922 she expelled Paul Foster Case who went on to set up his own mystical society, the Builders of the Adytum. The same happened with Dion Fortune, who claimed that, after Moina threw her out in 1927, she'd been attacked by monstrous black cats summoned up by Moina both on an astral and a physical level. Fortune also *hinted* that Moina or her followers might have been involved in the strange death of an occult

student called Netta Fornario, found dead and naked except for a cloak in moorland on Iona in Scotland, lying on a cross she had carved in the ground with a knife, her body marked with mysterious scratches like those of a huge cat. But Moina *had* been dead for six months by that point, and the scratches may just have come from running through undergrowth in the dark with nothing on.

Moina died in St Mary Abbots hospital in July 1928, having refused food for some time. She seems to have been reconciled with Annie Horniman before the end.

### *X. The Slade School of Art*

The building you can see dates to the 1820s; the architect was William Wilkins, who also designed the National Gallery. The Slade School originates in the six art scholarships bequeathed to UCL by Felix Slade in 1871. Moina and Annie Horniman studied here, so did many other women G.D. members – Althea Gyles, Patricia Colman Smith, Beatrice Offor, Isabella de Steiger, and Ithell Colquhoun in a younger generation.

I wonder what would have happened if Moina Mathers had pursued her artistic career instead of occultism. Her early drawings show that she was a very fine draughtsman, but when she returned to London in 1919 and tried to support herself by portrait painting, she was so out of practice that even her friends admitted the results were embarrassing. What different use could Samuel Mathers have made of his amazing memory and ability to process information? Even Aleister Crowley who (in my opinion, anyway) was an indifferent prose writer, a bad artist, and an awful poet, was by all accounts a pretty good cook. Perhaps he should have run a restaurant. So many talents that could have taken their owners in completely different directions.

In her last years, says Israel Regardie, Moina had been willing to initiate new A&O members by post; when Dion Fortune joined, the A&O was full of ‘widows and greybeards’ who had no interest in any new directions; and when Israel Regardie came across the Stella Matutina in 1933 he found the Temple he joined still had an Enochian Chess set, but the adepts all turned down his offers to play it: eventually he realised that nobody knew how. Aleister Crowley told a story of meeting Elaine Simpson, a former G.D. member he’d once been very close to and done magic with (though he broke with her after she wouldn’t leave her husband for him); Simpson told him she’d last worn her G.D. regalia at a fancy dress party in Hong Kong. By WW2 the A&O had stuttered to a halt, the SM survived in one small group in Bristol and a larger

one in New Zealand, and, as we saw, Mrs Tranchell-Hayes's magical equipment had already been buried in her back garden in Sussex. Yet, had the Matherses had their way and the G.D. system remained a secret, the Order would have been even more of a historical footnote than it is; but thanks to Dion Fortune, Israel Regardie, and to a degree Crowley, publishing the rituals and ideas, they've been hugely influential on the whole esoteric tradition.

In all these stories I have tended to emphasise the entertaining and sometimes ridiculous, and of course as a Christian priest I have my own views of the worth and wisdom of the whole G.D. phenomenon. But even though I don't believe the Secret Chiefs existed, even I can see how the G.D. system provides an interesting framework for meditation and spiritual understanding. Gerald Sutin, who wrote a biography of Crowley, defended the G.D. system: 'there is in it', he wrote, 'something noble and splendid which can enable us to fulfil our potential as God's sons and daughters in this glorious universe we inhabit. Anyone who doubts this should try performing the Lesser Banishing Ritual of the Pentagram daily for 6 months – it will occupy less than 10 minutes a day – and record the results. I have done so myself and experienced improvement on every level of my life'.

And some of the G.D. people were not just talented, but even good. Florence Farr, the radical and mystic, at the age of 52 in 1912 sold everything she owned, and left the UK to teach and eventually run a girls' college in Sri Lanka. She kept writing to WB Yeats, and her last letter to him, early in 1917, broke the news that she'd had to be operated on for breast cancer: "Last December I became an Amazon and my left breast and pectoral muscle were removed. Now my left side is a beautiful slab of flesh adorned with a handsome fern pattern made by a cut and 30 stitches." But the mastectomy didn't save her, and she was dead by April.

As for WB Yeats, he came to regret all the bitterness of his falling-out with the Matherses. When he published his meditation on poetic topics, *A Vision*, in 1925, he dedicated it to Moina and 'a number of young men and women who met nearly forty years ago in London and Paris to discuss mystical philosophy.' The epilogue of that book is a poem, in which Yeats listens to the bell of Christ Church cathedral in Dublin on All Souls' Night, when the dead are prayed for, and he summons up some of his old G.D. compatriots. He calls Florence Farr by *Emery*, her married name. This isn't the whole poem, but it gives you the idea.

*Midnight has come, and the great Christ Church bell  
And many a lesser bell sound through the room;  
And it is All Souls' Night.*

*And two long glasses brimmed with muscatel  
Bubble upon the table. A ghost may come;  
For it is a ghost's right,  
His element is so fine  
Being sharpened by his death,  
To drink from the wine-breath  
While our gross palates drink from the whole wine.*

...

*On Florence Emery I call the next,  
Who finding the first wrinkles on a face  
Admired and beautiful,  
And by foreknowledge of the future vexed;  
Diminished beauty, multiplied commonplace;  
Preferred to teach a school  
Away from neighbour or friend,  
Among dark skins, and there  
Permit foul years to wear  
Hidden from eyesight to the unnoticed end.*

*I call MacGregor Mathers from his grave,  
For in my first hard spring-time we were friends,  
Although of late estranged.  
I thought him half a lunatic, half knave,  
And told him so, but friendship never ends;  
And what if mind seem changed,  
And it seem changed with the mind,  
When thoughts rise up unbid  
On generous things that he did  
And I grow half contented to be blind!*

*Such thought — such thought have I that hold it tight  
Till meditation master all its parts,  
Nothing can stay my glance  
Until that glance run in the world's despite  
To where the damned have howled away their hearts,  
And where the blessed dance;  
Such thought, that in it bound  
I need no other thing,  
Wound in mind's wandering  
As mummies in the mummy-cloth are wound.*



*On the steps of St George's Bloomsbury – photo by Ms Francis*

# Epilogue

If the Lord wills it there will be more London Goth Walks one day. I have ideas forming in my mind even as I write, that might include -

‘Mew Pussy Mew’

‘Taking Liberties’

‘No Popery’

‘Cocktails with Elvira’

‘Tapp’d in Bunhill’

‘The Time-Travelling Tomb and Other Stories’

– but we will see! However there is no end to the tales we could tell, and yet end we must somewhere. I wish you happy walking, or just imagining walking, which might be even happier.



*The history of many-layered London provides endless scope for enthusiasts of the macabre and the arcane. In 2007 the London Gothic Meetup Group began investigating some of these subjects on a series of Walks that took its members to corners of the capital both well-known and obscure. This book includes a few of them!*

