

# **BRITISH CULTURE & SOCIETY I**

## **A History of London**

London is in fact two cities - 'The City of London' usually just called 'The City', and 'Westminster', which lies to its west. For all intents and purposes the West End (everything to the immediate West of the City) is now the centre of London - the East End (home of Cockney culture) is traditionally a poor working class and industrial area, currently undergoing something of a renaissance. There are slums within half a mile of the biggest concentration of financial power in the world - largely due to an invisible barrier between the City and the East End.

Londinium was founded by the Romans at a convenient crossing of the Thames, though it had been convenient for the local inhabitants too. Tacitus describes a flourishing trading city existing in AD 67. The area was marshy but there was a low hill, roughly where the Bank of England now stands and it was here that the Romans chose to build a typical Roman city, primarily for military reasons. Their forum was where Leadenhall market now stands.

They believed that Britain was a kind of El Dorado, and that they'd make their fortune here, as previous legions had grown rich off the Amber that Germans didn't seem to value. The river was navigable a long way inland, and tidal, which made it easy to get boats in and out. There's a great amount of Roman archeology about - the Museum of London leads digs whenever any building is erected so we know a great deal about the Roman period.

England at that time was inhabited by a hodge-podge of tribes and small kingdoms, and the Romans had little difficulty subduing them - despite some noble efforts at defence. The locals assimilated Roman culture, and after a couple of hundred years were more Roman than the Romans. When the Romans pulled out, pressured by frontier wars, the Saxons took over. They hated living in the old walled Roman city and established their own city of long huts, roughly where Covent Garden is today. This duality still persists - the 'City' is essentially Roman Londinium, and 'Westminster' is the Saxon add-on. When new invaders swept the country the Saxons and their kin moved back into the safety of the old Roman

City, now quite deserted, and it was here that London originated.



By the time the Normans took over from the Saxons, the basis of the mercantile capital was already laid: a charter of citizens' rights and a confederation of tradesmen, providing a counterweight to the aristocracy. London was a leading trading port of Western Europe - merchants from Italy, the Netherlands, France and Germany lived around the river - which had only one crossing - the Old London Bridge, until 1769. Food and wine came in, wool and leather went out. Due to the wool trade's centre in East Anglia - near the old Boston - London was for a time England's second city. However the establishment of merchant's guilds with the mayor at their head re-established London's place as capital. They grew up as 'misteries' or trades during the medieval period, (the 'Mystery Plays, still performed, are religious plays which were enacted by guildsmen).

These medieval guilds and livery companies exist today, and preserve fine buildings across the City - the Weavers' company dates back to 1130, the saddlers' company goes back to 1272, Wax Chandlers' Company to 1358, though the Launderers' guild was formed as late as 1960. Napoleon's jibe (he was actually quoting Adam Smith) that Britain was a nation of shopkeepers is true : with a living to protect from invaders, and trading routes and privileges to protect overseas, it was unsurprising that they made doughty fighters, as the French leaned to their cost at Crecy and Agincourt.

In Tudor times - after years wasted in wars of succession (which explains Henry

VIII's desperate and bloody attempts to secure a male heir) the dissolution of the monasteries, and terrible religious persecution (the country went from catholic to protestant, back to catholic and Henry VIII's need for a divorce saw the final breach with Rome) led to poverty and mass unemployment. The Black Death and other plagues decimated the population.



However by the late 16th century, the seeds of England's future as a world trading power were sown with the formation of the Trading Companies - The East India Company, The Muscovy Company the Levant Company, and the Turkey Company, which along with Britain's naval prowwess, saw management techniques still venerated by world corporations, conquer the world. England was also at the forefront of the arts with a lively theatre and music scene (the latter eclipsed by one European nation after another, its pre-eminence was not regained until after the First World War).

The Plague in 1665 and the fire in 1666 shook London out of its complacency (there are spectacular accounts of both these in Defoe and Pepys' journals) but also lead to a wave of property development (which is still going on), that saw the forerunners of Sir Richard Rogers (Wren, Hawksmoor and a whole crew of architectural geniuses) dominating the city skylines.

This redevelopment went on into the 18th Century, seeing buildings like The Bank of England and most of the Bridges across the Thames springing up. Tower Bridge (often mistaken for London Bridge, most notably by an American millionaire, who transplanted the old London Bridge to Arizona, only finding out on delivery he hadn't bought Tower Bridge) was opened in 1894. The Victorians supervised the transformation of London into a modern city, sewers and

underground railways (1863) tunneled beneath the clay of the world's capital, while overground railways (1836) and omnibuses (1855) opened up across the city, and the port of London enjoyed a final flowering.

Despite the presence of the Royal Palaces, Westminster Abbey (a place of pilgrimage) and the country's first printing presses, Westminster really only came into its own in the 19th century, and was granted the title of a City, with its own mayor in 1900. Until the 1850s it was the haunt of criminals who used the sanctuary laws to hide in the precincts of Westminster Abbey - there are still



roads such as 'Little Sanctuary' and 'Thieving Lane' which testify to its past. The redesigning of the area under Barry put paid to this unsavoury aspect and saw an expansion which coincided with the arrival of the railways, Victoria Station occupying the site of several private railway stations which were amalgamated in 1899.

The West End was to Shaw's London what Southwark was to Shakespeare's - the pleasure district, with hotels, theatres, restaurants and shops, while the City remained the financial heart of Europe, and the banking and share trading capital of the world. Prostitution and Crime were the twin blights of this area right up until the end of the war. The two World Wars saw huge destruction, to both the populace and the city and some terrible rebuilding followed, with little real conservation work - many of the city's worst buildings date from this time, when the Greater London Council changed the face of the old city forever. It's said that the GLC did more damage to London than the Luftwaffe.

London's architectural revival started with the completion of the Lloyd's building by Sir Richard Rogers in 1979 - and despite some terrible blunders (the most of them under Margaret Thatcher - the destruction of Battersea Power Station being the most obvious) and some corporate vandalism mostly committed in the City, by developers too close to the Corporation (Sir Peter Palumbo's destruction of the old Mappin and Webb building to erect one of London's most hideous monstrosities above Bank station, the destruction of Spitalfields market) London is beginning to rival Paris in its *Grand Projects*. However, whether much of the old London will remain as developers pry on the greed of local and city councils remains in question.

### Vocabulary Check

Write the English meaning for the following words taken from the text:

- a) founded \_\_\_\_\_
- b) slums \_\_\_\_\_
- c) navigable \_\_\_\_\_
- d) subduing \_\_\_\_\_
- e) kin \_\_\_\_\_
- f) mercantile \_\_\_\_\_
- g) decimated \_\_\_\_\_
- h) preserved \_\_\_\_\_
- i) prowess \_\_\_\_\_
- j) blights \_\_\_\_\_
- k) destruction \_\_\_\_\_
- l) vandalism \_\_\_\_\_
- m) blunders \_\_\_\_\_

### Comprehension Questions

Write the answer to the following questions in your own words with a sentence:

- 1) What were the 2 main reasons the Romans chose the location of London?

\_\_\_\_\_

2) Why did they build the city next to this part of The River Thames (2 reasons)?

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3) Why was it easy for the Romans to conquer England?

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4) Why was London England's second city for a time?

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5) During the Tudor period, what 3 factors led to mass unemployment & poverty?

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6) How did the population change & why?

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7) In the late 16<sup>th</sup> century, what 2 factors led Britain to conquer the world?

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8) What changed after 1769?

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9) In what ways did the Victorians transform London?

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10) What effect did the GLC (Greater London Council) have on London & why?

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