

“...above the Springs of Wandel...”

## Commentary

### Introduction

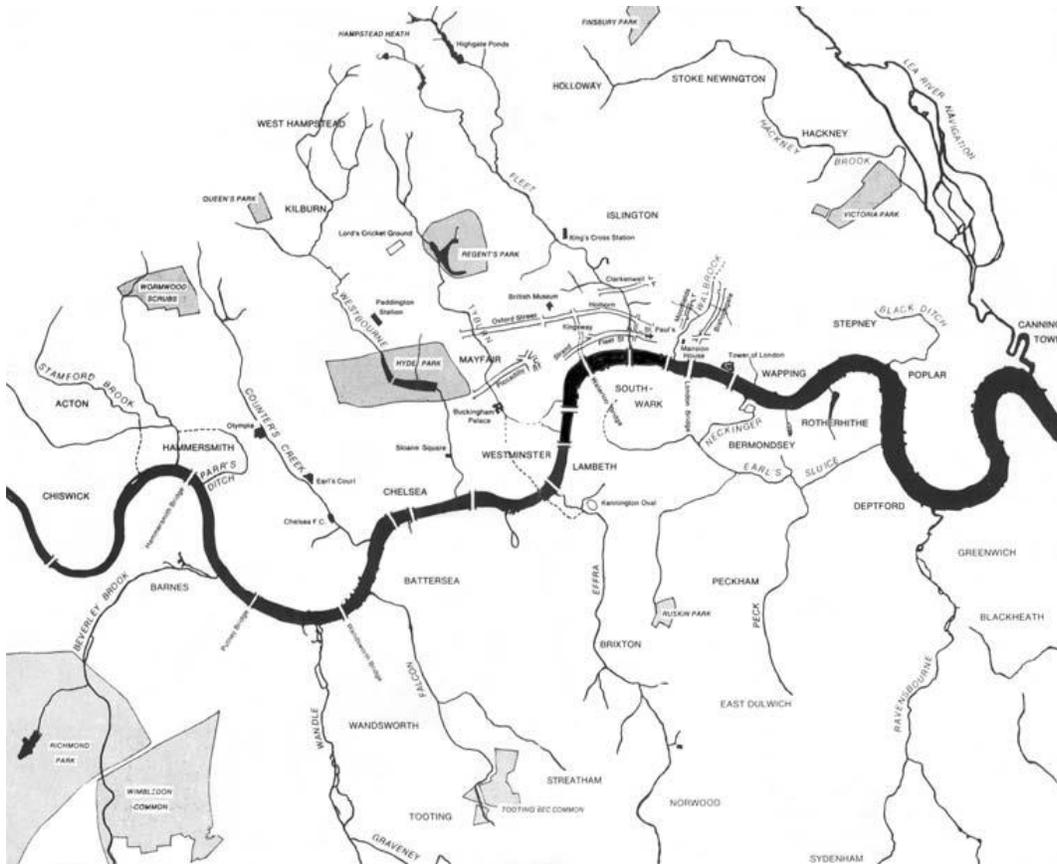
#### *Source*

‘above the springs of Wandel...’ was how John Ruskin described his memory of the Wandle in his autobiography<sup>1</sup> and this Commentary to accompany the Exhibition of this name will explore how we can remember forgotten rivers through literature. In many instances, such rivers in London have long been covered and we can and must rely on the works of our predecessors to find them for us; it is hoped that if it can be demonstrated that we can remember ‘lost’ rivers, then literature might also help us to remember other elements of our natural and cultural heritage. In turn this may act as a catalyst for restoration of such assets to enrich our lives and our knowledge of who and where we are in terms of time and place. Diana Athill’s view<sup>2</sup> is that the written word ‘enables (us) ...to enter other places (and) other times’. It is proposed that literature can indeed help us to other places and other times and thereby discover features that have been forgotten or mislaid.

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<sup>1</sup> Praeterita p.24 1885 – nb commonly known as the *Wandle* since 1900.

<sup>2</sup> Athill, Diana. ‘*A book that changed me.*’ The Guardian, Comment & Debate. P36. 5 September 2014.



### London's Thames Tributaries<sup>3</sup>

Because of course, the disappearance of these rivers is only temporary and they will return to their natural courses – even after perhaps the human race is long gone – so there is a case to find them and help them return now to enrich and protect our lives – especially from flooding. Through literature we will learn when they disappeared from everyday view but it is notable that there are real moves to let them free again – to the benefit of ecology, flood risk and amenity/harmony.<sup>4</sup>

London is defined by the Thames and the Thames is London. When Queen Mary “in her displeasure against London” contemplated moving her parliament to Oxford, a London alderman

<sup>3</sup> From: [http://london.openguides.org/pictures/lost\\_rivers.jpg](http://london.openguides.org/pictures/lost_rivers.jpg)

<sup>4</sup> This project draws and reflects on various strands of the MA – in particular Chorographies of Early Modern London, ecocriticism, climate change, writing the environment and, as will be seen, *Dog*.

reportedly asked whether she also intended to divert the Thames to Oxford.<sup>5</sup> However, it sometimes comes as a surprise<sup>6</sup> to remember that of course it has tributaries during its 20 miles through London just as it does in the first 150 – it’s just that many of those in the lower, tidal reaches are underground.

### *Basin*

The Thames basin is formed of alluvium in the river’s floodplain, bounded as it reaches London on the north and south by low hills forming the inner rim of the basin: to the north are Hampstead and Highgate Heaths whilst the southern rim is marked by Blackheath, Chislehurst Common and Dulwich Common (and ultimately an outer rim formed by the chalk of the North and South Downs). These higher points comprise permeable sands and gravels which overlie the London Clay: at the interface, springs emerge giving rise to the streams which flow to the Thames.



Geological map of the London Basin (R W Mylne 1871) – the blue strata are gravels overlying the London Clay

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<sup>5</sup> Stow K199. (See FN 9 below)

<sup>6</sup> *Totally Thames* participant, Sonia Gill, September 2014.

The Thames is over 200 miles long and 20 miles flow through London. There are more than 50 tributaries between the source and the sea and over 20 are in the tidal reach. At least two-thirds of these are buried underground – the Environment Agency estimates that of the 375 miles of London’s river network, 70% flows underground. The reasons for this are not hard to find.

### *Settlement*

There is little sign of permanent settlement on the site of present day London prior to the Romans<sup>7</sup> and it is concluded that the city was settled by them as a defensible site: two low hills divided by a small stream (the Walbrook) and bounded on all other sides by streams and marsh. They built a wall around the city which William the Conqueror enhanced/fortified by the building of two fortresses – the Tower of London in the east and Baynard’s Castle to the west on the banks of the Fleet River. Kipling reminds us:

Life was gay and the world was new  
And I was a mile across at Kew!  
But the Roman came with a heavy hand  
And bridged and roaded and ruled the land<sup>8</sup>



Roman London

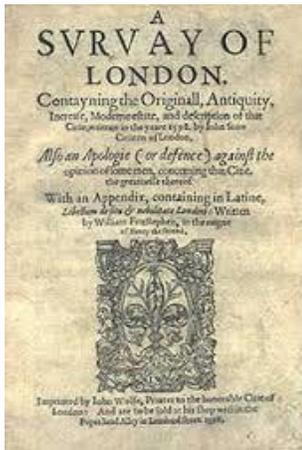
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<sup>7</sup> Grimes in Barton p.76.

<sup>8</sup> Rudyard Kipling *The River's Tale*. Lines 36-40.

This location provided a safe harbour and a plentiful water supply from these streams. The population changed over time: from thirty thousand in the Roman era, it fell to fifteen thousand by the arrival of William the First.

In 1598, John Stow published his *Survey of London*.<sup>9</sup>



John Stow and his Survey of London



Stow's Survey is a 'citizen history',<sup>10</sup> being a perambulation of his London but also drawing on records and archives so that it provides an indication of the scale and nature of change of the City. By Stow's time the population of London had risen to two hundred thousand<sup>11</sup>. Hebbert describes Shakespeare's London as 'a boom town, surrounded by building activity...the sense of life of Tudor London as a city of crooked buildings in crooked streets, dense, timber-built, overhung, as vibrant as a Moroccan *souk*'.<sup>12</sup> There then followed even more rapid acceleration reaching half a million by 1670 and one million by 1800. However the major period affecting the rivers was during the nineteenth century by the end of which London's population had reached six million.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> John Stow Survey of London 1598, 1603. After his death the Survey was published in several new, updated editions with the original 1603 edition reprinted in the nineteenth century. References in this Commentary are denoted by K referring to the 1909 edition by Kingsford followed by the page number.

<sup>10</sup> Bonahue p.78.

<sup>11</sup> Archer, Ian. *Material Londoners* in Orlin p.176. This is for London as a whole.

<sup>12</sup> Hebbert p.20.

<sup>13</sup> Myers p.70.

## *Rivers*

From the earliest times the tributaries of the Thames played a key role in the founding and development of London. Initially the Fleet and Walbrook for a water supply, defence and a safe harbour and then as the City's people moved west, the Tyburn provided further options for water supply. As the population grew so the 'exploitation' of the rivers grew: the Wandle had over sixty mills in its eleven mile length during the nineteenth century.<sup>14</sup> As Bolton says, '(these) tributaries are London's veins and arteries. They gave the first settlements purchase in locations where water and power could be more easily accessed than from the surging, tidal Thames.'<sup>15</sup> These and the other rivers now underground are sometimes marked by street names to remind us of their presence:



Hampstead, near the source of the Fleet.



The Walbrook flows beneath the walls of the Bank of England



King's Scholars' Pond Sewer is the name of the Tyburn in Pimlico.

## *Losing*

The loss of the rivers from view is due to two principal factors – their use as drains and urban encroachment. As attractive as rivers were for their various uses: drinking and bathing water, navigation, recreation, washing (clothing and food), the use which is often ignored is their

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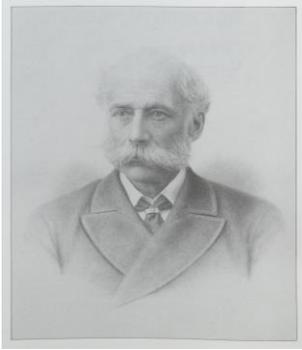
<sup>14</sup> Smith p.96.

<sup>15</sup> Bolton p vii.

function for the removal of waste – and this is the problem. Or as Bolton describes it ‘the relationship turned sour’.<sup>16</sup> With the population growth as noted above, wells became dry as well as polluted, and the rivers and streams could no longer self-purify the polluting load placed on them by the discharge of foul sewage. Added to this was the effluent from trades - leatherworking, tanneries and slaughterhouses in particular, which tended to gather around sources of water for industrial processing. All the waste went to the rivers - which obliged by carrying it away to the Thames - until the carrying capacity was reached and they became clogged with putrid waste matter which rotted, decayed and exuded foul odours. It was at this point that they were covered to remove the stench and at the same time to provide extra land for much needed housing. And so gradually the rivers disappeared from view. The Walbrook was the first to go and by the end of the sixteenth century little was visible above ground; the Fleet, Tyburn and Westbourne all became largely hidden by the middle of the nineteenth century. It was then that the use of water closets increased as did the volume of wastewater to these ‘sewers’ which in turn discharged their contents into the Thames. Parliament noted the smell of the Thames and decided that something had to be done. That ‘something’ was to set up the Metropolitan Commissions of Sewers in accordance with the Metropolitan Sewers Act 1848. And the conclusion reached in 1858 was that intercepting sewers should be constructed to convey wastewaters to tidal outfalls downstream of London. This was undertaken by the chief engineer to the Metropolitan Board of Works, Joseph Bazalgette.

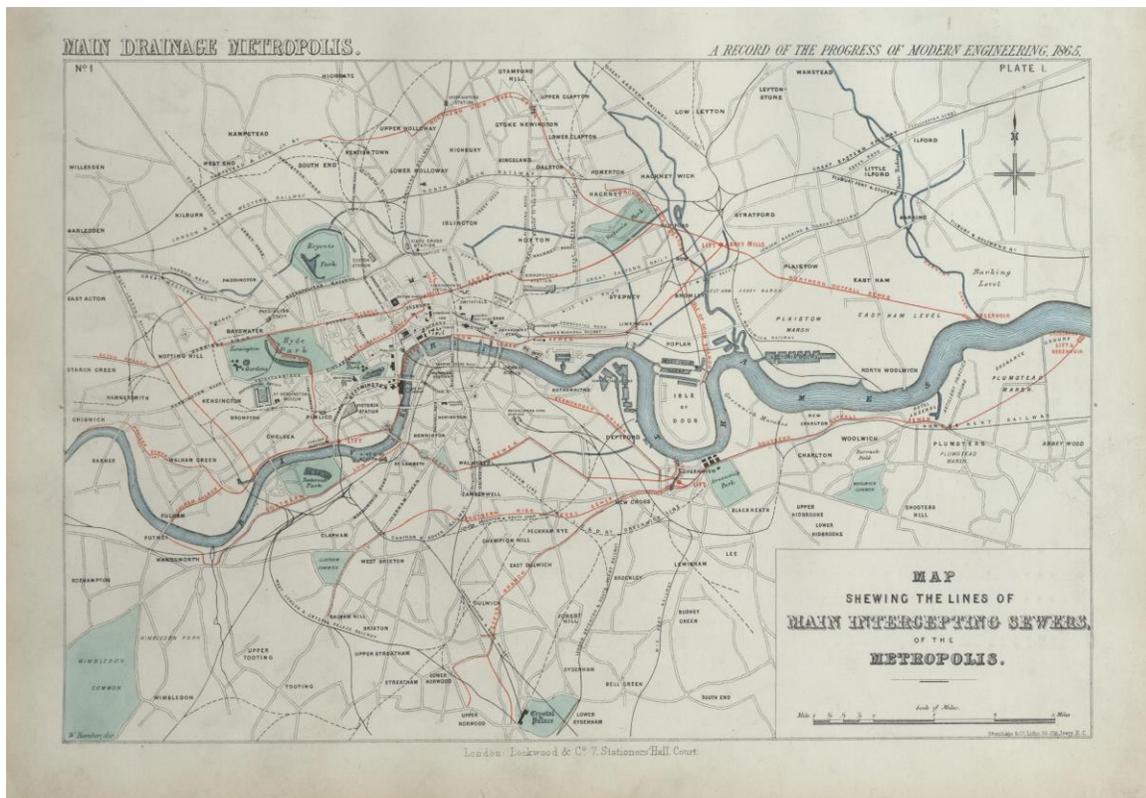
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<sup>16</sup> Bolton p viii.



Sir Joseph Bazalgette

The scheme entailed the construction of new embankment walls in the Thames – thus reducing its width by as much as a third of its medieval dimensions. The Fleet, Tyburn, Walbrook and the Westbourne on the north bank all disappeared, as well as the Neckinger and the Earl's Sluice on the south bank.



Joseph Bazalgette's Sewerage scheme<sup>17</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Provided by library of the Institution of Civil Engineers, from *A Record of the progress of modern engineering, 1863-1866*. 4 Vols / Humber, W. ed.

This commentary will describe how literature can help us remember them.

### *Process*

Looking at old maps, the courses of rivers that are no longer above ground were traced and the routes walked. Observation of street names, names of commercial premises and topography provided a guide to routes previously followed – and known - by residents of London. This process was greatly assisted by taking part in a number of guided walks.<sup>18</sup> Sometimes writers have lived in the vicinity of rivers and have drawn upon them to play a role or to form the setting for literary work – evidence can be found by close reading of London writers as well as the few books written on London’s ‘lost’ rivers. This was followed by consultation with organisations, libraries and archives.<sup>19</sup> An element of psychogeography was of necessity introduced into the process by a pedestrian exploration and imagining hidden features employing a ‘toybox full of playful, inventive strategies for exploring cities (promoting) a new awareness of the urban landscape’.<sup>20</sup> This is in the tradition of William Blake and Daniel Defoe and recently practised by Iain Sinclair. Such imagining strategies included visualising the rivers in their ‘original’ buried valleys as well as the sounds and smells that would have been experienced first-hand by the earlier writers.

The rivers lost within London are generally thought to be about fourteen<sup>21</sup> but for the purposes of this project, the rivers examined had to be limited so an initial filter restricted those searched to those within the old LCC and then further condensed to four rivers – two, the Fleet and the Walbrook, flowing to the north bank of the Thames and two, the Wandle and the Peck system, to the south.

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<sup>18</sup> As part of the ‘Totally Thames’ Festival in September 2014. The helpful guides are named in ‘Acknowledgements’.

<sup>19</sup> See Appendix for outline method and Acknowledgements for list of societies, libraries and museums consulted.

<sup>20</sup> Joseph Hart *A New Way of Walking*.

<sup>21</sup> Barton p.12.

### *Remembering - gone or mislaid?*

The following sections look at these four rivers in turn to see how literature can help us remember them...

As noted above, the rivers will undoubtedly return. As U A Fanthorpe wrote:

*Being of our world they will return  
(Westbourne, caged at Sloane Square,  
Will jack from his box),  
Will deluge cellars, detonate manholes,  
Plant effluent on our face,  
Sink the city. (Rising Damp, 1980)<sup>22</sup>*

They might still...

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<sup>22</sup> In *Ode to London* p.31-4.

## The Fleet

... River to brook, brook to ditch, ditch to drain<sup>23</sup>

### *Catchment*

“*Speculations on the Source of the Hampstead Ponds, with some observations on the Theory of Tittlebats*” – a paper so titled communicated by Samuel Pickwick, Esq., G.C., M.P.C. and heard read by the Association, with feelings of unmingled satisfaction, and unqualified approval.’

Transactions of the Pickwick Club 12<sup>th</sup> May 1827<sup>24</sup>



Charles Dickens

These are the opening lines of Dickens’ ‘*The Pickwick Papers*’ and whilst sadly we never get to hear the conclusions of Mr Pickwick’s speculations, we can be sure that the source of various Thames tributaries are to be found on Hampstead Heath.<sup>25</sup> As will be seen, Dickens used the river as a setting for much of his work.



Fleet Ditch, Pond Street, Hampstead 1860.

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<sup>23</sup> Barton p.31.

<sup>24</sup> Dickens, Charles. *The Pickwick Papers* p.11.

<sup>25</sup> The others being the Tyburn and the Westbourne.

As pointed out in the Introduction, the gravels overlying the London Clay on the Heath are permeable and so at the junction of these two geological features springs arise. The Fleet has two sources on Hampstead Heath: Hampstead Ponds and Highgate Ponds. The streams join in Camden and on to Kings Cross and down Farringdon Road to its confluence with the Thames at Blackfriars – a distance of some 7 miles. It had a deep valley at Holborn which can still be seen although the river itself is hidden after Hampstead Heath.

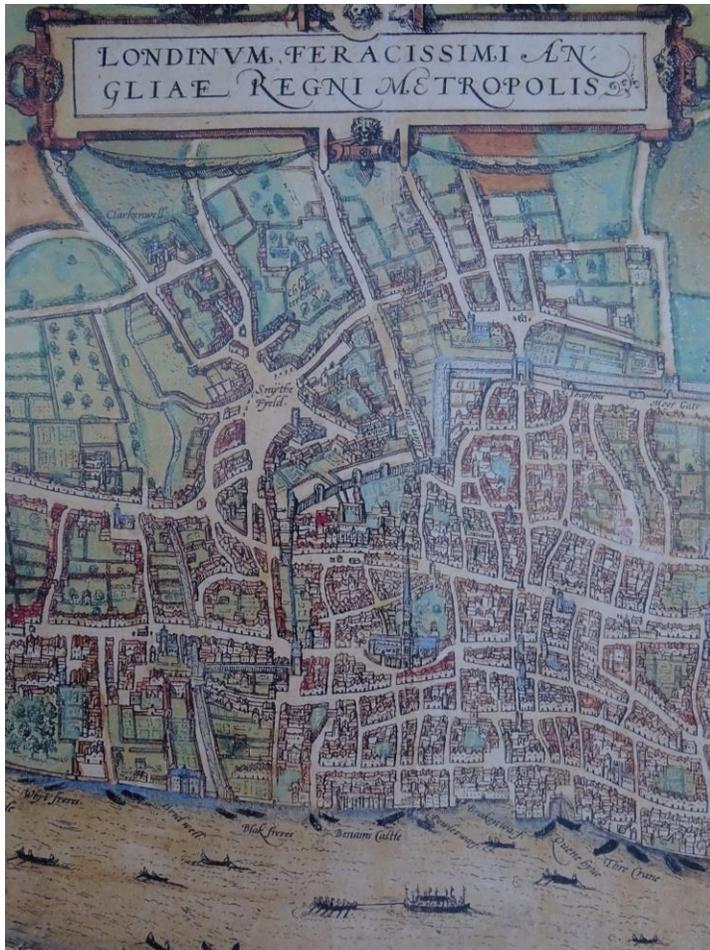
### *History*

It marked the western boundary of Roman Londinium and, latterly, the City of London. Anglo-Saxon *Flēot* means estuary and it was once 600 feet wide. John Betjeman captures its early life:

Then would the years fall off and Thames run slowly  
Out into marshy meadow land flowed the Fleet<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Betjeman, *Monody on the Death of Aldersgate Station* (Betjeman lived on the banks of the hidden Fleet for some years).



London 1572, Braun & Hogenberg, Fleet mouth

bottom left at 'Blak freres'.

It was also known as the River of Wells in the 13<sup>th</sup> century in recognition of the value of its springs – St Pancras, St Chad's, St Brides Clerkenwell, Sadler's Wells - and it became an area for recreation. William Fitzstephen writing in the twelfth century, records that there were 'many places of pleasant resort, streams and springs (outside the walls)'.<sup>27</sup> It was sometimes called the Turnmill Brook since there were so many mills on the Fleet; there were also many trades attracted by its waters: meat markets, tanners, butchers. The valley was called Holbourne (or

<sup>27</sup> Fitzstephen, William *History of London* 1173, in Besant p.64

Oldbourne) from the word holburna (hollow stream), a reference to the river's deep valley – in some places 25 ft below street level. The wharves were used for bringing coals from Newcastle



memories of previous activity in the City



as well as stone for the rebuilding of St. Pauls Cathedral. The Holborn Viaduct, an iron bridge opened by Queen Victoria in 1869, spans the Fleet Valley. By the time of John Stow's Survey, it had become choked and polluted and was a health hazard. As Ashton says: 'Poor little river! Its life began pure enough but men so befouled it, that their evil deeds rose against themselves and the river retaliated in such kind, as to become malodorous and offensive, nuisance dangerous to the health of those men who would not leave it to its purity...'.<sup>28</sup> Lord Chesterfield said when asked by a Parisian whether London could show a river like the Seine, he replied 'Yes, we call it Fleet Ditch'.<sup>29</sup>

### *Closure and Loss*

After the Great Fire of London in 1666, Christopher Wren proposed widening the river; this was rejected. Instead, the lower Fleet was converted into the New Canal, completed in 1680 as a 'Venetian' Canal with bridges and wharves.



Fleet Bridge, Crosby after Scott 1750<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Ashton p.225

<sup>29</sup> In Foord p.42

<sup>30</sup> Series of sketches made by Anthony Crosby in 1830-40s: *Views of the River Fleet*. This is clearly a 'copy' of Samuel Scott.



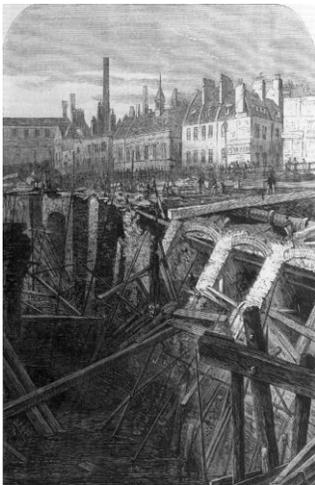
... and Scott's original in the Venetian style.

But it was still polluted and by 1769 was covered from Ludgate Circus to the Thames.

The Hampstead sections were covered below the Ponds in the 1870s as the urban area grew.

### *Flood*

The Fleet was incorporated in Bazalgette's scheme in 1865 but rivers rarely die as Arnold Bennett recorded in *Riceyman Steps*. During the construction of the underground Metropolitan Railway '*the terrific scaffolding ...was flung like firewood into the air...the mighty Fleet sewer had broken...*' - Kings Cross was flooded.



the Fleet bursts in 1862

## Remembering

From a rural idyll to Dead Dogs:

The Fleet was the largest and most important river in the development of London, and so it is perhaps not surprising that it features prominently in literature from Shakespeare onwards. This provides an opportunity to chart its progress through time...

Stow records in *Of Ancient and Present Rivers* that William the Conqueror called it the River of Wells, indicating its usefulness and purity, but by the time of Edward I in 1307, a complaint was heard ‘that whereas in times past the course of the water...under Fleete Bridge...had been of such breadth and depth, that ten or twelve ships navies at once... were wont to come to the foresaid bridge...now the same course, by filth of the tanners...was sore decayed’.<sup>31</sup> According to Stow, the river *was* cleaned but lost its name and became the Turnmill. In 1502, ‘the whole course of Fleete dike, then so called, was scowered...so that boats with fish and fuel were rowed to Fleete bridge’.<sup>32</sup> He had memories of the valley:



the Fleet valley in Kentish Town 1832 (Crosby)

‘within these fortie yeares, had on both sides fayre hedgerowes of Elme trees ... the pleasant fieldes, very commodious for Citizens therein to walke, shoote, and otherwise to recreate and refresh their dulled spirites in the sweete and wholesome ayre, which is nowe within few yeares

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<sup>31</sup> Stow K11.

<sup>32</sup> Stow K11 - now Fleete dike (ditch).

made a continuall building throughout.’<sup>33</sup> Kingsford tells us that ‘he remembered pleasant walks and green fields (fileds) where in his lare days there were only streets and houses.’<sup>34</sup>

Shakespeare (writing in 1592) gives these memories substance when the Duke of Gloucester (Richard III) tells the Bishop of Ely: ‘...when I was last in Holborn, I saw good strawberries in your garden there.’<sup>35</sup>



William Shakespeare

This is a reminder that in the time of Richard III around 1480 the banks of the Fleet here were gardens and orchards attached to the Bishop’s Palace at Clerkenwell – other street names here support this memory – Hatton Garden, Pear Tree Walk, Saffron Hill and Vine Street. Crosby reminded potential subscribers that the Palace of Ely was on the banks of the Fleet and the Bishop’s barge would be ‘borne on its flood’.<sup>36</sup>



Saffron, from the crocus, was grown on the banks of the Fleet.

However whilst this is Stow’s (and Shakespeare’s) memory, by the time Stow was recording in his Survey the Fleet had changed: “by means of continual encroachments upon the banks...and casting of soylage into the stream, is now become worse cloyed and choken than

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<sup>33</sup> Stow K 120.

<sup>34</sup> Stow K xxviii.

<sup>35</sup> *Richard III* Shakespeare 1592.

<sup>36</sup> Crosby 1832.

ever it was before.”<sup>37</sup> Stow did have a tendency to look back with nostalgia – something that Raymond Williams has warned against ‘using the past as a stick to beat the present’<sup>38</sup> and so we should be cautious of accepting his words at face value. Graphic accounts are given of the state of the Fleet however by a succession of writers as it seemingly rapidly deteriorated in quality as the population of the City grew.

Soon after Stow’s time Ben Jonson in 1616 wrote *On the Famous Voyage* recounting the (perhaps imaginary – it followed the contemporary genre of fantastic exploits made on the basis of a tavern wager) journey by boat up the Fleet as far as Holborn. This poem is, in the opinion of McRae,<sup>39</sup> neglected largely due to the ‘queasiness in the face of the poem’s subject matter.’ Whether it uses the Fleet as an allegory for the human body, the state of civil government and management or merely to draw attention to the river’s grossly polluted condition,<sup>40</sup> the poem certainly pulls no punches – Helgerson calls it ‘among the filthiest, the most deliberately and insistently disgusting poem in the language’<sup>41</sup> – however it could be argued (and probably Jonson did) that desperate times call for desperate measures. Jonson apparently had none of Stow’s nostalgia although he could readily change his direction at will – he had been involved in at least one Lord Mayor’s Show.<sup>42</sup>



Ben Jonson

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<sup>37</sup> Stow K11.

<sup>38</sup> Williams p.12.

<sup>39</sup> McRae, Andrew ‘*On the Famous Voyage*’: *Ben Jonson and civic space*. In Gordon, A & Klein, B. P.181.

<sup>40</sup> or as Mardock claims, to celebrate the poet’s interpretive and transformative power over London’s places p.21.

<sup>41</sup> In McRae p.181 (Richard Helgerson p.152 in Ben Jonson ‘*The Cambridge Companion to English Poetry*’, 1993).

<sup>42</sup> Hill p.25.

It has been called both ‘a satire on the age’,<sup>43</sup> and a journey through a grotesque urban body.<sup>44</sup> Once the voyagers enter the feminised body (at Bride-well) in the form of the waterway, a ‘dire passage...through a dock’ (line 58) they experience the full force of solid and liquid wastes that the body has to throw at them. However, (line 59) ‘this Dock’s no rose’ introduces several more puns but principally that the ‘rose’ can be a syphilitic sore - prostitution and venereal disease play a role in the story and what goes in/on the Fleet; mercury was promoted as a cure for venereal disease:

At this a loud  
Crack did report it selfe, as if a cloud  
Had burst with storme, and downe fell, *ab escelsis*,  
Poore MERCURY,<sup>45</sup>

Holborn, the destination of the voyagers, was known for its brothels as well as a ‘centre for mercurial sweat baths’.<sup>46</sup> Whilst this is clearly a dramatised tale, privies were built over the Ditch and brought with them responsibilities for keeping it clean – a duty which was often ignored. It may be suggested then that the poem’s purpose was to alert the City Viewers and authorities to such duties and enforce remedies.

For Stow, the waters of the city were a source of civic pride<sup>47</sup> but he ‘shuns any mention of the attendant flow of sewage...he wants the ditch cleansed but does not acknowledge its vital role’<sup>48</sup> in removal of wastes. Stow’s ‘city consumes openly, but excretes discreetly’<sup>49</sup>. Jonson is not so squeamish and is clear about what goes into the Ditch:

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<sup>43</sup> Medine, Peter. *Object and intent in Jonson’s Famous Voyage* Studies in English Literature 15 1975 p.98. in McRae p.182.

<sup>44</sup> McRae p.182 adapted from Rhodes Elizabethan Grotesque, 1980.

<sup>45</sup> Jonson lines 93-6.

<sup>46</sup> Burford, *Bawds and Lodgings* p.173 in McRae p.194.

<sup>47</sup> McRae p.188.

<sup>48</sup> McRae p.189.

‘...Mud, which, when their oares did once stirre,  
Belched forth an ayre, as hot as at the muster  
Of all your night-tubs, when the carts doe cluster,  
Who shall discharge first his merd-urinous load.’ (lines 61-64)

It is possible to chart locations from the poem: ‘By this time had they reach’d the Stygian pool’ (line 121) is the stretch of the Ditch before Fleet Street Bridge, where they are tormented by ‘ghosts of farts’.<sup>50</sup> Acheron,

The ever-boiling flood; whose banks upon  
Your Fleet-lane Furies, and hot cooks do dwell, (line 143)

is a sink for offal and butcher’s waste in Fleet Lane which ran from the Old Bailey to a wharf on the Fleet north of Ludgate Hill. The epigram ends as the voyagers reach their destination:

In memory of which most liquid deed,  
The city since hath rais’d a Pyramide (lines 193-4)

Mardock disputes that this has anything to do with the completion in 1613 of Myddleton’s New River which had a Water House with a ‘high, near-pyramidal roof’<sup>51</sup> at New River Head in Clerkenwell and we may have to employ some ‘inventive strategies’ to imagine that Jonson was referring to the New River. There is not the space in this commentary to pursue the debate about the purpose or intention of *On the Famous Voyage* but there can be confidence that Jonson was using a real situation as the basis for his drama – he may have exaggerated but satire or political motives lose their strength and are dissipated if there is not at least some substance to the tale. This is given weight and corroboration by later works.

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<sup>49</sup> McRae p.189.

<sup>50</sup> Mardock p.21.

<sup>51</sup> british-history.ac.uk *Survey of London* Vol 47 pp.165-84. The New River brought a secure water supply to London.

Despite Stow's and Jonson's protests the city had no sewerage system and the river would undoubtedly have been seriously polluted and continued in this state such that a century later in 1710 Jonathan Swift writing of Smithfield and the market said:

'Fall from the conduit prone to Holborn bridge  
Sweeping from butchers' stalls, dung, guts, and blood,  
Drown'd puppies, stinking sprats, all drenched in mud,  
Dead cats, and turnip tops, come tumbling down the flood.'  
(*A Description of a City Shower*<sup>52</sup> lines 60-3)



Jonathan Swift

Swift was pleased with this poem – in *Journal to Stella* in October 1710 he wrote: 'This day came out *The Tatler* made up wholly of my Shower...and they say it is the best thing I ever writ, and I think so too'.<sup>53</sup> *City Shower* has been described as 'mock-pastoral'<sup>54</sup> – depicting a mundane event in London to demonstrate Swift's knowledge of the city and to 'assert that he belonged among some of the most famous and urbane Englishmen of his age'<sup>55</sup>: Swift too had an ulterior motive for representing the Fleet. He pursued his picture of the Fleet linking it with the sad figure of Corinna in *A Beautiful Young Nymph Going to Bed*:

'Or near Fleet-ditch's oozy brinks  
Surrounded with a hundred stinks,

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<sup>52</sup> Swift, Jonathan. *A Description of a City Shower*. October 1710. *The Tatler* No.238.

<sup>53</sup> In Ashton *The Fleet* p.17 *Swift Complete Works, Journal to Stella*, Letter 6, London, 17 October 1710.

<sup>54</sup> De Gategno p.60.

<sup>55</sup> Nora Crow Jaffe in De Gategno p.60.

Belated, seems on watch to lie,

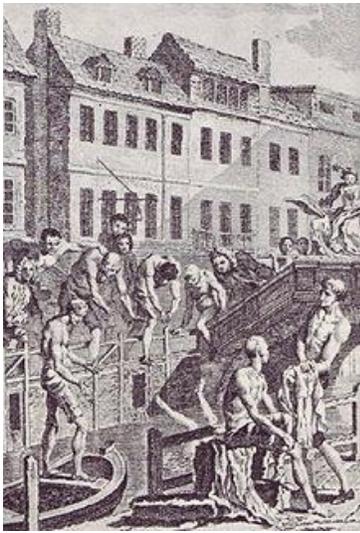
And snap some cully passing by'<sup>56</sup> (lines 47-50)

and in 1728 Alexander Pope followed the theme of literary merit/mileage in recounting the presence of dead dogs in his satire of a 'goddess' bringing ruin to the country:

'...to where Fleet-ditch with disemboгуing stream

Rolls the large tribute of dead dogs to Thames,'

*The Dunciad*<sup>57</sup>



Pope's 'Dunces' bathing in the polluted Fleet.



A picture emerges through the literature of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries – when the Fleet was visible – of a polluted river as well as the sources of such pollution but the writers examined all had good reason to exaggerate its condition, and so, whilst there was undoubtedly basis for their drama, the degree of pollution cannot be confirmed. However, Ackroyd maintains that the 'Fleet epitomised the way in which the city fouled water once sweet and clear' and quotes Ward writing in 1703 in *The London Spy* '...the greatest good was to the

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<sup>56</sup> Ford p.238.

<sup>57</sup> Pope *The Dunciad* Book 2 Line 271.

undertaker....'<sup>58</sup> Crosby said in 1832 'this troubled stream is still seen to rush through its dark prison to the Thames.'<sup>59</sup>

While Dickens had painted a refined picture of the source of the Fleet in 1837, he soon turned to making literary capital from its condition in the urban morass:

'and so to Saffron Hill...a dirtier or more wretched place he had never seen. The street was very narrow and muddy and the air was impregnated with filthy odours.' *Oliver Twist*.<sup>60</sup>

Smithfield Market was on the opposite bank of the Fleet from Saffron Hill (joined by Cowcross Street), and saffron was often used to colour tainted meat.



Old Homes with the open part of the Fleet Ditch near Field Lane. JW

Archer 1840. Field Lane led to Saffron Hill.

Fagin had his den in this area on the banks of the Fleet. Dickens pictures the time when the Fleet flowed in its valley in the opening lines of *Bleak House*<sup>61</sup> when on a foggy November afternoon we are asked to imagine that there is 'much mud in the streets, as if the waters had but newly retired from the face of the earth, and it would be wonderful to meet a Megalosaurus, forty feet

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<sup>58</sup> Ned Ward in Ackroyd, 2000, p.556.

<sup>59</sup> Crosby p.2.

<sup>60</sup> Dickens *Oliver Twist* 1838 p.55.

<sup>61</sup> Dickens *Bleak House* p.9.

long or so, waddling like an elephantine lizard up Holborn Hill.’ It may be thought that Dickens had further associations with the area - The Betsy Trotwood public house on Farringdon Road is named after David Copperfield’s aunt but has no literary association with the Fleet, having previously been the Butcher’s Arms – perhaps a more suitable name given the locality.

### *Imagining*

Once the Fleet was covered, writers had to resort to their imagination...

Sinclair maintains that the Fleet is probably the most mythologized of London’s lost rivers<sup>62</sup> and although not referencing the writers mentioned above, speaks of the ‘close relationship with Smithfield Market: its thickened and clogged with morbidity, the butchery of animals and the disposal of hoofs, horns, carcasses, dogs, rats, birds’ – of course not a reality since Bazalgette; Sinclair is remembering from our earlier writers. He quotes Aidan Dun who speaks of a river famous for ‘healing and medicinal waters’<sup>63</sup> which Dun later finds to be ‘a buried river (facilitating) a miasma of disease, cholera, typhoid; a conduit of mephitic air, bubbling green slime, carcasses and anatomical leftovers from Bart’s Hospital suppurating against the barrier of the watergate’<sup>64</sup>

As was seen above, Bennett imagined the Fleet to extract retribution for its undignified entrapment when it burst in 1862. Bennett never forgot the Fleet: Henry Earlforward (*Riceyman Steps, 1923*) dreams of the time when ‘*Clerkenwell was a murmuring green land of medicinal springs, wells, streams with mills on their banks...*’<sup>65</sup> And Bennett also repeats this in the form

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<sup>62</sup> Sinclair p.16.

<sup>63</sup> Sinclair p.17.

<sup>64</sup> Sinclair p.36 (Aidan Andrew Dun *Vale Royal* 1995).

<sup>65</sup> Bennett *Riceyman Steps* p.9.

of a 'memory' of Henry's uncle who 'told his tale with such force and fire that he had a stroke'.<sup>66</sup> Henry inherits Riceyman's bookshop (now the site of the 1970s Kings Cross Road Travelodge) as a result. The Fleet is thus central to the thread of the book's 'plot'.<sup>67</sup>

Some of the supposed mystical qualities of this 'Artery of Old London'<sup>68</sup> were employed as the basis for *New Tricks*<sup>69</sup> in which a conceptual artist drowns at the Vale of Health (the Fleet's source); later an art critic is found drowned in the sewer at Holborn. Finally the artist's muse jumps from Holborn Viaduct, but not of course into the river. Thus a blood offering is made to the spirit of the Fleet River.

There is possibly one other poet who imagined the Fleet. John Keats was born in Moorgate in 1795 and moved to Hampstead in 1817. He died in Rome in 1821 and was buried in the Protestant Cemetery there. His last request was to be placed under a tombstone bearing only the words "Here lies One whose Name was writ in Water." It is thought to be a reference to his belief that he would soon be forgotten. The Fleet was largely hidden by his lifetime although he walked its route many times so we can imagine that although we struggle to find reference to rivers or the Fleet in his work, his life *was* intertwined with its course.



Fleet River, St Pancras, 1825. Walter Prior.

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<sup>66</sup> Bennett p.21.

<sup>67</sup> Although it tends to be the Underground Railway which his uncle admired so much that is also appropriately an underlying feature after the incident with the bread knife, 'only the brief, faint rumble of an Underground train could be heard and felt in the silence'. Bennett p.51.

<sup>68</sup> *New Tricks* BBC1 15<sup>th</sup> September 2014.

<sup>69</sup> *New Tricks* BBC1 15<sup>th</sup> September 2014.

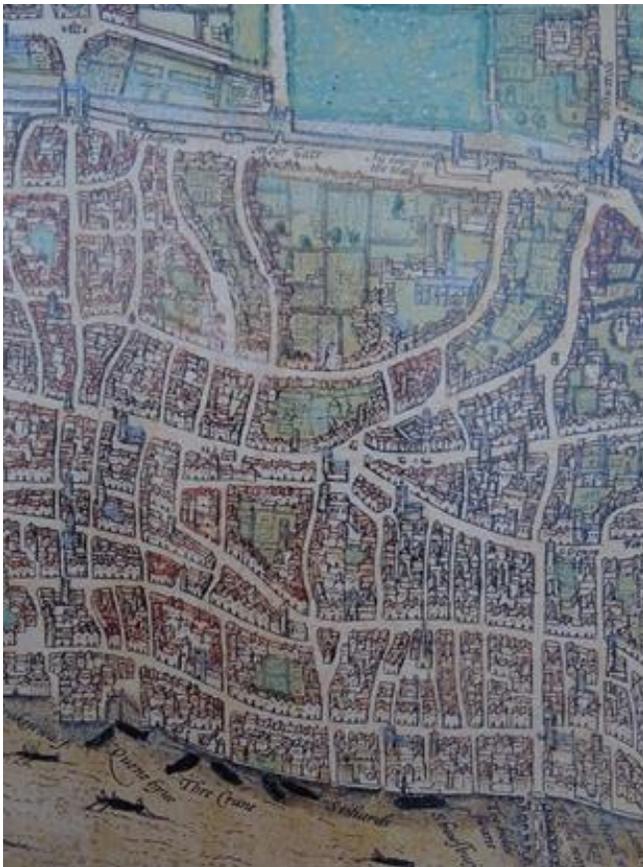
# The Walbrook

## A sacred river

### *Catchment*

*'...Aunciently, vntill the Conquerors time, and 200 yeres after, the Citie of London was watered besides the famous Riuer of Thames, on the South part, ... on the west, with a water called Walbrooke running through the midst of the citie... seruing the heart thereof.'* John Stow, Survey of London, 1598

The Walbrook is one of London's most elusive rivers: one source is said to be at St Leonard's Church, Shoreditch, the other north of the Angel, Islington. It crosses the City Wall



the route of the Walbrook in 1572 – outfall near

Stiliards.

(from which it takes its name: the Brook by the Wall), under the Bank of England, to its confluence with the Thames at Dowgate.

This was a harbour in Roman times and was used for the unloading of Kentish Ragstone from the Medway with which to build the City Wall. The Shoreditch tributary joins the Islington branch at Holy Well Priory. (This branch powered a lead mill at City Road into the nineteenth century). Fitzstephen wrote: ‘to the north of the city are fields and pastures, and a delightful plain of meadow land, interspersing with flowing streams’; Martin identifies this area as Finsbury where ‘the archers of The Guild of St George’<sup>70</sup> practised their skills. At the Wall, Stow described ‘*an iron grate in the channel which runneth under the watercourse of Walbrook before ye come to the postern called Moorgate*’. The river was only some two miles long - its valley was between Ludgate Hill and Cornhill but it was only ever fifteen feet wide and shallow; upstream of the constriction of the Wall however the branches formed a marsh at Moorfields. Fitzstephen records that skating occurred here during freezing winters. It divided the City into two and its waters fed the moat of the Tower of London as well as the City’s defensive ditch.



Neptune in John Soane’s Bank of England – a river flows beneath...

Stow records that in 1574 its flow was so swift that ‘a lad of eighteen years old, minding to have leapt over the channel, was borne into the narrow stream towards the Thames with such violent wiftness as no man could rescue or stay him, till he came against a cart wheel that stood n the Watergate, before which he was drowned and stark dead.’<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Martin p.1.

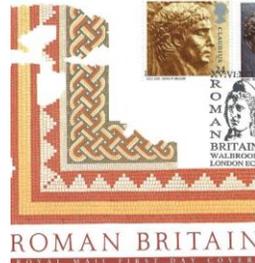
<sup>71</sup> Stow K 229.

## History

It was the birthplace of Roman London and Roman sites abound along its length including the Temple of Mithras,<sup>72</sup>



Mithras from Bucklersbury



discovered in 1954 at Bucklersbury, as well as bathhouses along its course. It has acted as a lodestone for spirituality and attracted temples and churches to its valley. Shakespeare's early plays including *Romeo & Juliet* - were performed on the site of the Holy Well Priory in 1576.



Holy Well Priory site, once *The Theatre*, 1576 – moved across the Thames in 1598 to be *The Globe*.

## Closure

It was one of the first of London's rivers to be covered. The Court of Common Council in 1383, declared that it was '*stopped up with divers filth and dung thrown in by persons who have houses along the said course*'<sup>73</sup>. In 1477, the court prohibited the discharge of latrines into the Walbrook and the owners of houses along its banks were charged with arching over the river. By

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<sup>72</sup> The cult of Mithraea originated in ancient Persia.

<sup>73</sup> in Martin p.4.

1500, it was embanked<sup>74</sup> and covered by 1598: John Stow recorded that it ‘was afterwards vaulted ouer with bricke, and paued leuell with the Streetes ... and since that also houses have beene builded thereon, so that the course of *Walbroke* is now hidden vnder ground, and therby hardly knowne’.<sup>75</sup> Myers maintains that from the Bank of England to the Thames it may be as much as 12 metres below ground as a result of infill from demolition over a period of some 2000 years.<sup>76</sup>

Its route passes beneath St Margaret’s Church, Lothbury as well as St Mildred’s Church which was built over it in 1456. The fact that churches were built over the stream adds an air of piety to the flow; St Stephen<sup>77</sup> and St. John the Baptist churches were built on its banks. Ackroyd sees it as beginning ‘at a sacred well and touching ...six holy places in the course of its journey...a site for ritual activity.’<sup>78</sup>

Today even its outfall isn’t really there... ‘tracing the Walbrook is an act of faith and resurrection’<sup>79</sup>

### *Remembering*

A river of utility, mystery and ancient rites...

Shakespeare worked and wrote and no doubt performed near to the sources of the Walbrook but references to rivers are thin in his work. However in the *Merry Wives of Windsor*, Falstaff makes reference to Bucklersbury (near to the site of the Temple of Mithras and the Walbrook) which was famous for its grocers & apothecaries -‘these lispig hawthorn-buds, that

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<sup>74</sup> Schofield p.296 *The Topography & Buildings of London, ca.1600*, in Orlin, *Material London ca.1600*.

<sup>75</sup> K 11-19.

<sup>76</sup> Myers p.130.

<sup>77</sup> Pevsner lists St Stephen as one of the ten most important buildings in England.

<sup>78</sup> Ackroyd, 2012, p.43.

<sup>79</sup> Bolton p.118.

come like women in men's apparel, and smell like Bucklersbury in simple-time<sup>80</sup>. Ben Jonson claimed in *Bartholomew Fair* when a 'black boy in Bucklersbury, that takes the scurvy, rogyu tobacco'<sup>81</sup> to have been inspired by Webster and Dekker's *Westward Ho!* in which Mrs. Tenterhook commands 'go into Bucklersbury and fetch me two ounces of preserved melons look there be no tobacco in the shop'.<sup>82</sup> Stow says 'this whole streete called Buckles bury on both the sides throughout is possessed of grocers and apothecaries'.<sup>83</sup>

Jonson was engaged with the river and introduced the outfall of the Walbrook in 1630 in his *Corollary to Inigo Jones*:

'...He some Colussus, to bestride the seas,  
From the fam'd pillars of old Hercules:  
Thy canvas giant, at some channel aims,  
Or Dowgate torrent falling into the Thames,  
And straddling shows the boys' brown-paper fleet,  
Yearly set out there, to sail down the street!'<sup>84</sup>

This was cast as ironic praise for the scene painting skills of his former collaborator Inigo Jones on *Chloridia*; the Walbrook was unlikely to have been a 'torrent' even at its outfall, although Stow's story of drowning may perhaps add some velocity to its flow. Since the poem arose from a quarrel,<sup>85</sup> we can only remember the Walbrook and perhaps draw few conclusions as to its nature from Jonson; his ability to dramatise has been seen on the Fleet.

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<sup>80</sup> *Merry Wives of Windsor* Act III Scene 3.

<sup>81</sup> *Bartholomew Fair* Act 1 Scene IV.

<sup>82</sup> Webster & Dekker *Westward Ho!* 1604 Act 3 Scene3.

<sup>83</sup> Stow K 259.

<sup>84</sup> Jonson. *To Inigo Marquis Would-be. A Corollary*. p.114.

<sup>85</sup> A quarrel between Jonson and Jones arose from the absence of Jones' name from the title page of the court masque, *Chloridia* 1630, for which Jonson provided the verse and Jones the scenery. It was not that well received which may have prompted Jones to lay blame on Jonson.



a Court Masque by Inigo Jones

In his *Journal of the Plague Year*, Daniel Defoe, writing in 1722 to alert people to the perils of the Black Death then sweeping Europe, talks of ‘...a great pit in Finsbury...lying open then to the fields... (many) came and threw themselves in, and expired there...’<sup>86</sup> This was probably Finsbury Circus, on the course of the Walbrook.



Daniel Defoe

Defoe was ‘warning about the possibility of a plague and its horror throughout his life’ having been a young boy when the 1665 Great Plague occurred ...‘the places where the pits had been were well marked and remained part of the geography of London’<sup>87</sup>. A modern poet, Tom Chivers, has remembered that there were double burials here, skeletons without heads, bodies crouched in fear...

‘Outside the walls. But a strange place to bury the dead. Too wet. Too waterlogged. Walbrook floods and coffins scoured by the water, bodies rising to the surface, free again from earth, the river washing clean their bones, washing them downstream, skulls rolling along the riverbed, bobbing against the banks, bodies breaking up. First go the hands and the wrists, then the feet. Off goes the

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<sup>86</sup> Defoe p.83.

<sup>87</sup> Novak p25.

head, and the mandible. The legs and arms begin to separate, and then we're done. A floating torso. That was a man. That was a woman. A good place for a cemetery.'<sup>88</sup>

Chivers is referring to the Roman burial ground and he promotes a practical exercise in psychogeography: 'by looking back and down – through history and geology (you see) how this so-called lost river continues to be a ghostly presence in the city'.<sup>89</sup> He charts its hidden course through the city:



'a hirsute river god' ...Cophthall included (allegedly) Stow's father's garden...

'Cophthall Street. Look how it resembles a meandering stream, a gully cutting through the urban fabric. The Walbrook squeezes through here, seeking the relief of gravity, gradient. Walbrook of the Wall, running underneath, a babbling froth where the river backs up into fen, creating the urban wetland of Moorfields, a liquid seeps beneath All-Hallows church.'<sup>90</sup>

### *Imagining*

Allen Fisher imagines the Romans at Walbrook and the crowds of Londoners who were drawn to its mysticism when the Temple was uncovered in 1954:

A Roman rabble at Londinium...

Soldiers of faith, Kipling's khaki awe

Leave Temple of Mithras at Walbrook

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<sup>88</sup> Chivers. Walbrook Pilgrimage, September 2014 from text (all ©Tom Chivers).

<sup>89</sup> Chivers.

<sup>90</sup> Chivers.

Where radiating streets 1954 lap enrichment...

*(Place 2005)*

Chivers does not think ‘the Walbrook will be restored. It was the first of London’s rivers to disappear, and it will be the last to reclaim the city when – however many thousands or millions of years in the future – London runs to ruin’,<sup>91</sup> but with a warming planet it may be sooner...



the end of the Walbrook?

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<sup>91</sup> Chivers.

# The Wandle

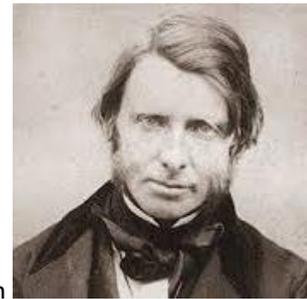
A working river...

## Catchment

“under the low red roofs of Croydon, and by the cress-set rivulets in which the sand danced and minnows darted above the Springs of Wandel”.<sup>92</sup>



Market Street, Croydon



John Ruskin

This is how John Ruskin remembered the source of the Wandle during his visits to his aunt’s house in Market Street, Croydon. The Wandle starts its journey to the Thames at Croydon; it is joined by a stream at Carshalton and then meanders north to its ‘delta’ at Wandsworth, a distance of some eleven miles. It takes its name from Wandsworth, although William Camden (1586)<sup>93</sup> asserts that it gave its name *to* Wandlesworth and latinises it to *Vandalis*, a name adopted by Alexander Pope in 1713.<sup>94</sup> Camden describes it as a ‘cleere riveret...so full of the best trouts’.

Rising below the chalk of Croydon, the Wandle is augmented today by the treated effluent from the sewage treatment works at Beddington ensuring a constant flow in the river to

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<sup>92</sup> *Praeterita*, John Ruskin, 1885 p 24. There have been variations on the spelling of the Wandle; this is Ruskin’s and we will find others.

<sup>93</sup> William Camden 1586. *Britain, or, a Chorographicall Description of the most flourishing Kingdomes, England, Scotland, and Ireland*. In Goodman, December 2004, p.12.

<sup>94</sup> Alexander Pope *Windsor Forest* 1713 Line 345.

its confluence with the Thames. It is not entirely ‘lost’ and as will be seen it is being re-discovered and restored in its upper reaches.

### *Working*

It has traditionally been a working river with 13 flour mills recorded in the Domesday Book. By 1605, the river was described as ‘the hardest worked of any of its size in the world’<sup>95</sup> and in the mid-nineteenth century there were over 60 mills from Croydon down to Wandsworth – for tobacco, snuff, copper, leather, gunpowder, cannon , flour and parchment.



an old mill at Waddon, on the

Wandle near Croydon

It was culverted through Croydon in 1840 following a cholera outbreak associated with Croydon’s expansion and the culvert was extended in the 1930s through the gasworks and then Wandle Park in 1968.

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<sup>95</sup> Guiseppi quotes Malcolm in his *Compendium of Modern Husbandry* - who noted 40 industrial undertakings in 1605.



culverting the Wandle, Croydon Gasworks, 1930s.

In 1881, William Morris and William de Morgan took over an old Huguenot silk mill as a textile workshop at Merton, using the water of the Wandle for dyeing. Morris wrote *'if a chap can't compose an epic poem while he's weaving a tapestry he had better shut up'*.<sup>96</sup> He spent much time working at Merton so has to have been inspired there – he produced a 'gently flowing pattern'<sup>97</sup> fabric design which he named 'Wandle'. Liberty & Co. also adopted a mill nearby which was in operation until 1972.



William Morris - Wandle fabric design

### *Neglect*

A stream joins the Wandle at Carshalton. Here Ruskin was incensed and it is worthy of quotation at length (albeit in abbreviated form) for the strength of feeling expressed in the nineteenth century at careless pollution:

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<sup>96</sup> Asa Briggs p19.

<sup>97</sup> MacCarthy p.445.

‘Twenty years ago, there was no lovelier piece of lowland scenery in South England...than that immediately bordering on the sources of the Wandle...

No clearer or diviner waters ever sang with constant lips of the hand which 'giveth rain from heaven'...



William Tatton, Winter Carshalton Village in the '80s. (1880s)

The place ...remained, nearly unchanged in its larger features; but ... I have never seen anything so ghastly .... as the slow stealing of aspects of reckless, indolent, animal neglect, over the delicate sweetness of that English scene: nor is any blasphemy or impiety - more appalling to me ... than the insolent defilings of those springs by the human herds that drink of them. Just where the welling of stainless water, trembling and pure, like a body of light, enters the pool of Carshalton, cutting itself a radiant channel down to the gravel, through warp of feathery weeds, all waving, which it traverses with its deep threads of clearness, like the chalcedony in mosaic, starred here and there with white grenouillette; just in the very rush and murmur of the first spreading currents, the human wretches of the place cast their street and house foulness; heaps of dust and slime, and broken shreds of old metal, and rags of putrid clothes; they having neither energy to cart it away, nor decency enough to dig it into the ground, thus shed into the stream, to diffuse what venom of it will float and melt, far away, in all places where God meant those waters to bring joy and health.’<sup>98</sup>

In 1876 he set about cleaning it up and named it Margaret’s Pool after his mother.

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<sup>98</sup> John Ruskin *The Crown of Wild Olive* 1866 p.6 Preface.



Margaret's Pool, Carshalton

The Wandle is not lost, but has been forgotten – some might say mislaid – due in no small part to the industrialisation of south west London. Eric Newby recalled that in the early 1900s his father ‘used to bathe, winter and summer, in the now polluted waters of the Wandle where it entered the Thames at Wandsworth.’<sup>99</sup> It was buried at Croydon, culverted through Wandsworth and contained within sheet-steel piled banks and tamed by sluices at its mouth. Factories discharged their effluent into the river: it was classified as a sewer.

### *Remembering*

From rural idyll to post-industrial dereliction – but awakening

William Camden (1551-1623) an antiquarian traveller, wrote his long treatise *Britannia* in 1586 and being written, as was customary, in Latin, as seen above, he named the Wandle *Vandalis*. There is no evidence that the Romans had a name for it at all<sup>100</sup> - it was Hlida Burna to the Saxons. Camden spoke not only of the trout but also of the surroundings ‘the river...passing Morden leaves on its west bank Merton, situate in a most fruitful spot’. However, he does see it as rising in ‘Cashalton’ and then ‘increased from the east by a little stream rising at Croydon’ – we would see it as the other way round.

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<sup>99</sup> Eric Newby p.32.

<sup>100</sup> Judith Goodman *The Wandle in Literature* - 2. December 2004.

Michael Drayton (1563-1631) was inspired by Camden and in *Poly-Olbion* (published in instalments between 1612 and 1622), pays overt homage to the virginal, pre-industrial Wandle – although it must be remembered that there were even then at least a dozen mills on the river:

The Wandal commeth in, the Moles beloved mate,  
So amiable, faire, so pure, so delicate,  
So plump, so full, so fresh, her eyes so wondrous cleer:  
And first unto her Lord [the Thames], at Wandsworth doth appeare...<sup>101</sup>

It seems Drayton was not alone in taking inspiration (a recurring theme on the Wandle) from Camden, since Alexander Pope in his 1713 tribute to Queen Anne, *Windsor Forest*, the Wandle is one of the attendants to the Thames, the River God:

‘around his throne the sea-born brothers stood, who swell with tributary  
urns his flood:  
...The blue, transparent Vandalis appears;’<sup>102</sup>

Another chorographer, Daniel Defoe wrote in 1724:

‘(from) Croydon it is but a little mile to Cashalton (sic)...situate among  
innumerable springs which all together, form a river in the very street of  
the town and joining the other springs which come from Croydon and  
Beddington... make one stream which are called the Wandell. This village  
seated among such delightful springs...makes the most agreeable spot on  
all this side of London’.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Drayton – in Goodman, December 2004 p.12.

<sup>102</sup> Pope line 345.

<sup>103</sup> Defoe p.167.

Defoe was writing from the perspective of describing ‘the most flourishing and opulent country in the world’<sup>104</sup> and, according to Schellenberg, secured this by asking the reader to accept it as an ‘objectively verifiable portrait of contemporary Britain’.<sup>105</sup> It was popular, running to several editions during the eighteenth century and despite Defoe’s aim to portray Britain in a prosperous, harmonious light, it is unlikely to be inaccurate. Cobbett a century later in 1823 ‘found (the corn) looking well...on the chalk from Croydon’<sup>106</sup> tends to substantiate this continuous sense of prosperity and well-being in the area.

Although the river was famous for its fishery - and it appears in some editions of Izaak Walton’s *The Compleat Angler* (first published 1653), there has been some debate as to who first made the reference to the Wandle trout.<sup>107</sup>

*Piscator* “Nay Brother, you shall not stay so long; for look you, here’s a Trout will fill six reasonable bellies.”



coarse fishing on the Wandle at Merton.

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<sup>104</sup> Defoe p.43.

<sup>105</sup> Schellenberg p.304.

<sup>106</sup> Cobbett p.164 30<sup>th</sup> July 1823.

<sup>107</sup> Judith Goodman June 2009. The Wandle variety of trout with marked spots like a tortoise – a note by John Hawkins and selected by James Rennie for this later, 1833 edition. The conclusion is that it was not Walton who made the comment but Hawkins in the 1790s.

Sir Humphry Davy (1778-1829), inventor and scientist was also a keen angler and in 1828 published what can be seen as a parody of Walton: *Salmonia; or Days of Dry Fly Fishing*. Like *The Compleat Angler*, it takes the form of a conversation between Physicus (philosopher) and Haleius (fisherman).

*Physicus*: “I dare say you know where this excellent trout was caught: I never ate a better fish of the kind”

*Haleius* “I ought to know, as it was this morning in the waters of the Wandle...”

Haleius later says that ‘Nelson (who lived with Lady Hamilton at Merton Place) was a good fly-fisher, and as proof of his passion for it, continued the pursuit even with his left hand...’<sup>108</sup>

The rural idyll image is perpetuated by the words of Keats’ friend, Leigh Hunt (1784-1859) in his autobiography,<sup>109</sup> recalls a summer holiday at Merton in about 1795: ‘walking one day by the little River Wandle, I came upon one of the loveliest girls I ever beheld, standing in the water with bare legs, washing some linen’. This does not make him a reliable witness to the quality of the Wandle.

Ruskin’s association with the river should be placed in perspective. His memory of the ‘Springs of Wandel’ is of the 1820s. By the time of the publication of *The Crown of Wild Olive* in 1866 he was looking back 20 years when the river was still a brook but by the 1860s it was ‘ghastly’. We can have a sense of change as suburbia approaches Surrey. Yet Rudyard Kipling, on returning to India in 1884 at the age of 16, having spent ten years in England, writes fondly of his (perhaps rose-tinted) memories of England:

‘But Wandle’s stream is Sutlej now,

And Putney’s evening haze

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<sup>108</sup> Judith Goodman March 2004.

<sup>109</sup> Leigh Hunt p.165.

The dust that half a hundred kine  
Before my window raise.’

*The Moon of Other Days*<sup>110</sup>

He likens the Wandle to the Sutlej which is a major tributary of the Indus – a warning that prose and poetry may not always reflect our environment accurately.

HG Wells makes reference to the Wandle in *War of the Worlds* – he was first married at All Saints Church in Wandsworth and lived for a time nearby in Haldon Road, so perhaps it is understandable that he should include it in his fantasy: ‘The Wandle, the Mole, every little stream, was a heaped mass of red weed...’<sup>111</sup>



Edward Thomas

In 1913 Edward Thomas made a journey on bicycle from London to Somerset. From the detail (which can be corroborated today), we can be confident that this is an accurate portrayal of the urbanization of the valley. Three public houses stand on a corner at Summerstown at the ‘edge of the still cultivated and unpopulated portion of the flat land of the Wandle – the allotment gardens, the watercress beds, the meadows plentifully adorned with advertisements and thinly sprinkled with horse and cow...twenty acres of damp meadow. On the left it was bounded by the irregular low buildings of a laundry, a file and tool factory, and a chamois-

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<sup>110</sup> *The Moon of Other Days* 1886, in Goodman March 2006.

<sup>111</sup> *The War of the Worlds*, 1897 p.279 (the observer notes the aftermath of the Martian invasion).

leather mill; on the right by the dirty backs of Summerstown'.<sup>112</sup> We can sense despair though: 'it is easy to make this flat land sordid. ...the kind of estate disappears that might preserve trees and various wasteful and pretty things...if any waste be left under the new order, it will be used for conspicuously depositing rubbish. Little or no wildness of form or arrangement can survive, and with no wildness a landscape cannot be beautiful'.<sup>113</sup> He almost sounds like Ruskin.



Wandle downstream from Summerstown

Thomas's fears were well founded and by 1976 Michael de Larrabeiti, in *The Borribles*, described the Wandle's mouth: 'there were dozens of barges here, deeply laden with the old lumber of all Wandsworth, for the land around the estuary was a vast rubbish dump and somewhere among the hillocks of refuse meandered the slimy river'.<sup>114</sup> However this desolation did not last and John Betjeman, (who had an enthusiasm for suburbia) foresaw the survival of the river:

'Oh, in among the houses,  
The viaduct below,  
Stood the Coffee Essence Factory  
Of Robinson and Co.

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<sup>112</sup> Thomas p.37.

<sup>113</sup> Thomas p.41.

<sup>114</sup> de Larrabeiti in Bolton p.267.

Burnt and brown and tumbled down  
And done with years ago  
Where the waters of the Wandle do  
Lugubriously flow.’<sup>115</sup>



John Betjeman

He may not have foreseen the work to recover the Wandle from its various burial places – work that will transform its valley and perhaps some of the other rivers we have followed.



The Wandle delta... where Newby's father would swim

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<sup>115</sup> *South London Sketch, 1944*. The location for Robinson's is unknown; while there were many coffee essence factories in London there were none in Wandsworth or south-west London so 'this picturesque and plausible enterprise was entirely a fiction of the poetic imagination' Judith Goodman. There was however a Robinson's flour mill on the Ravensbourne.

# The Peck

and Earl's Sluice, Neckinger – a delta

## *Catchment*

‘Miss Frierne...walked with one of the Highlanders up to One Tree Hill...he took her hand and thrust it under his kilt...she screamed so hard, she had a quinsy for a week.’



*The Ballad of Peckham Rye*, Muriel Spark, 1960<sup>116</sup>



The Oak of Honour on One Tree Hill.

The Peck springs from One Tree Hill at Honor Oak in south London and flows north to Southwark and Rotherhithe. This was once a marshy delta and it joins the Earl's Sluice (from Denmark Hill where John Ruskin lived in the 1820s) en route to its now hidden outfall at Surrey Docks. The Peck and the Earl's Sluice are both about 5 miles long; the latter was named in the 12<sup>th</sup> century after the Earl of Gloucester (Lord of the Manor of Camberwell and Peckham), and was a drainage channel for the swampy ground. There is no trace of the Peck on Rocque's 1746 map *Ten Miles Round London*, and the London Ecology Unit confirm that after flowing through what is now Peckham Rye Park, The Peck 'flowed north a short distance to Peckham where the

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<sup>116</sup> Spark p.40.

stream disappeared underground into the gravels eventually to join the Earl's Sluice... (which) has been entirely covered since 1831 as the Earl Main Sewer'.<sup>117</sup>

The Neckinger was a similar drainage channel meandering through Lambeth and Bermondsey – (named after the gallows called the Devil's Neckcloth where Thames pirates were hanged). It rises under the Imperial War Museum, crosses under the Elephant and Castle to Abbey Street – the site of Bermondsey Abbey founded in 1082 and where the monks set up a mill. It was once navigable from the Thames to the Abbey.

### *History*

Legend has it that Elizabeth 1 had a picnic at One Tree Hill – but it is probably only a legend since although she visited in 1602 'On May Day the Queen went a maying to Sir Richard Buckey's at Lewisham',<sup>118</sup> there is no record of her going further.



Camberwell/Lewisham Parish Boundary marker, One Tree Hill.

There is a borough (and County – Kent and Surrey) boundary marker here between Camberwell and Lewisham, and the 'annual *beating the bounds* ceremony would stop here and sing Psalm 104<sup>119</sup> 'He sends the springs into the valleys; they flow among the hills'.<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> London Ecology Unit p.2.

<sup>118</sup> Nisbet, Cllr John, *The Story of the 'One Tree Hill' Agitation* The Enclosure of Honor Oak Hill Protest Committee, 1906. In Bolton p.139.

<sup>119</sup> The New Testament p. 553. Psalm 104, verse 10.

<sup>120</sup> Bolton p.138.

According to Bolton the hill appears in Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Sorcerer* 'I often roll down One Tree Hill' adding to its disreputable reputation,<sup>121</sup> since couples would roll down the hill together. The Peck is today visible as it enters Peckham Rye Park (*Rye* means watercourse so Peckham Rye is the 'village by the River Peck') but soon disappears and is only marked by a depression across the park; William Blake had a vision here as a boy.

There was a watersplash where the Earl's Sluice crossed the Old Kent Road known as Thomas-à-Watering, after Thomas à Becket. In the LCC *Survey of London*: 'Earl's Sluice, crossed the (Old Kent Road) and where Chaucer's pilgrims halted to decide who should tell the first of the Canterbury Tales, was near the boundary between Southwark and Camberwell.'<sup>122</sup> It was enclosed as the Earl Main Sewer in 1820–23, but the section near the Old Kent Road remained open until 1831.



Earls Sluice sewer, Rotherhithe

The Neckinger is notorious: the Abbey water-mill formed an area known as Jacob's Island, named in the Morning Chronicle in 1849 as 'the Venice of Drains, the Capital of Cholera'; it was where Bill Sikes met his end in Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist*. Dickens also used the Bermondsey river front for the setting of *The Old Curiosity Shop* and *Our Mutual Friend*.

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<sup>121</sup> Bolton p.139. However, it is most likely that this 'One Tree Hill' was in nearby Greenwich.

<sup>122</sup> [www.british-history.ac.uk/survey-london/vol25/p.121](http://www.british-history.ac.uk/survey-london/vol25/p.121).

## Today

Some authors can help unravel these intertwined rivers... as Bolton says ‘the pleasures hidden in SE postcodes.’<sup>123</sup>

## Remembering....

From a marsh to industrial backlands...

In Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, 1380 – the first stop for a ‘Tale’ was where the Earl’s Sluice crossed the Old Kent Road at Humphrey Street at a watering place.... a station of the Tales? The pilgrims started from the Tabard Inn on Borough High Street, Southwark:

‘befell that in that season, on a day,  
In Southwarke at the Tabard, as I lay,  
Redie to wenden on my Pilgrimage’<sup>124</sup>

It wasn’t long before they stopped at Wateryngs Bridge:

‘...and forth we riden, a litel more than pas  
Un-to the watering of Seint Thomas.’<sup>125</sup>



Geoffery Chaucer

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<sup>123</sup> Bolton p.138.

<sup>124</sup> Stow K52-69.

<sup>125</sup> Chaucer lines 827-8.



Old Kent Road mural

Allen Fisher has described his present day journey in *Place* along these intertwined streams:

after I left I crossed its path at Albany Road

and entered the Thomas A Beckett pub

after the Sluice walked upstream

along a connecting stream to Neckinger

(the course between Bermondsey Abbey and the Thames)<sup>126</sup>

Samuel Pepys reached the Neckinger; on 27<sup>th</sup> November 1665 he recorded in his diary:

‘...(I) go to wait on the Duke of Albemarle, who is to go out of towne to Oxford to-morrow, and I being unwilling to go by water, it being bitter cold, walked it with my landlady’s little boy Christopher to Lambeth, it being a very fine walke and calling at half the way, and drank...’<sup>127</sup>

His lodgings were at Tower Hill and The Half-the-Way Inn was on Gray Street, Southwark, on the banks of the Neckinger. (Its name changed to the Stage Door in 1985).

At the age of ten in 1767, William Blake walked from his home in Soho to Peckham Rye Common and according to Blake’s biographer, Alexander Gilchrist, escaped a beating on his return with these words:

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<sup>126</sup> Fisher p.44.

<sup>127</sup> Diary of Samuel Pepys p.2325.

‘...a tree filled with angels, bright angelic wings bespangling every bough like stars’<sup>128</sup>



William Blake



Peckham Rye 1770

Charles Dickens (born in 1812) of course found plentiful material in the vicinity of these rivers – places that he knew intimately as a child when for a time his parents were in the Marshalsea Debtors Prison in Borough High Street; he would visit them daily from his lodgings in Lant Street and his work in a blacking factory at Hungerford Stairs.

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<sup>128</sup> Gilchrist, Alexander, *The Life of William Blake*, in Bolton p145.



the Neckinger today from the Thames

The Neckinger forms Jacob's Island at its confluence with the Thames (at St. Saviour's Dock) and it is here that Dickens places Bill Sikes in *Oliver Twist* - where Sikes lived and died - in an area of extreme poverty and degradation; it was Henry Mayhew who called it the Venice of Drains<sup>129</sup> and Dickens gives a vivid description :

‘...in such a neighbourhood beyond Dockhead



Dockhead remembered on Jamaica Road



... stands Jacob's Island, surrounded by a muddy ditch...known these days as Folly Ditch. It is a creek or inlet from the Thames, and can always be filled at high water by opening the sluices at the Lead Mills... At such times, a stranger, looking from one of the

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<sup>129</sup> Mayhew, *A visit to the Cholera district of Bermondsey*. Morning Chronicle 1849, in Bolton p.196.

wooden bridges thrown across it at Mill Lane will see the inhabitants of the houses ...(lower)...buckets, pails, domestic utensils of all kinds, in which to haul the water up... the houses (have) holes from which to look upon the slime beneath;...rooms so small, so filthy, so confined, that the air would seem too tainted even for the dirt and squalor which they shelter; wooden chambers thrusting themselves out above the mud, and threatening to fall into it – as some have done; ...every repulsive lineament of poverty, every loathsome indication of filth, rot and garbage - all these ornament the banks of Folly Ditch.<sup>130</sup>



Folly Ditch, Jacob's Island.

It is appropriate to conclude this perambulation of four forgotten London rivers with reference to Dickens who began the journey at the source of the Fleet with Mr Pickwick. Mr Pickwick retired to Dulwich in the valley of the Earl's Sluice, it is thought to what is now Pickwick Cottage in College Road<sup>131</sup>.

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<sup>130</sup> Dickens *Oliver Twist* p.317.

<sup>131</sup> Charles Dickens and Southwark. P.25.

“The house I have taken,” said Mr Pickwick, “is at Dulwich. It has a large garden, and is situated in one of the most pleasant spots near London.”<sup>132</sup>

Dickens found some of the most pleasant as well as the most disreputable places in London on the banks of its forgotten rivers.

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<sup>132</sup> Dickens, *Pickwick Papers* p.635.

## Reflections

### *London's Rivers - lost but not forgotten?*

This Commentary and accompanying Exhibition have shown how Literature and writers can help us remember forgotten rivers. The research and contiguous perambulations of these particular London rivers has demonstrated that we can indeed remember hidden environmental and cultural assets through such a study. Imagining the sights, sounds and smells of the rivers when they were in full flow – an exercise in psychogeography – can also help engage with the writers' own context. The most fruitful sources are naturally those produced when the rivers were extant and visible – even so, later writers can also remind us of our heritage. However, caution has to be exercised in taking such literature and descriptions at face value: writers often dramatise – it is their job - or have ulterior motives for the scenes they present.

The rivers although buried are not gone – the water has to go somewhere – and even where they are subsumed within the sewerage system they will overflow during storms – just to remind us of their presence, in case we were minded to forget. It is for this reason that there are proposals for a London super-sewer to capture all the rainwater so that polluting sewage overflows should become a thing of the past. However there is now concern at this proposal<sup>133</sup> and another and more sustainable option is to separate the rainwaters from the sewage and release the rivers from 'their dark prisons', allowing them to carry spring and rainwater so that they run clean again: Literature can guide us to their valleys.

We can reflect therefore on what has been learned and remembered: rivers have been buried as a reaction to pollution and reduced to sad little outfalls or just a memory. But writers have shown us their courses.

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<sup>133</sup> The Guardian 28<sup>th</sup> November 2014. *£4bn super sewer – money down the drain?* P.46.

## *Rediscovery*

For the past twenty years, the River Restoration Centre has promoted such ‘release’ to the acclaim of communities throughout the UK – there are examples on some of London’s rivers – on the Ravensbourne and Quaggy, as well as on the Wandle.<sup>134</sup>

The Wandle was ‘put back’ into Wandle Park for the first time in 40 years in 2012. Dave Webb from the Environment Agency said: “Opening up this culverted section of the Wandle will restore the river as the focal point of the park and provide a wonderful environment for people and wildlife. It will be a shining example of how to improve a local park while also managing flood risk, assisting with adaptation to climate change and creating a healthy river.”<sup>135</sup>



Cranes above the Wandle – the Wandle restored in Wandle Park

If rivers are reunited with their floodplains they will no longer threaten us and sewage may be transported separately and safely for treatment. There is no evidence that Literature has played a part in this process as yet but it could add weight to pressure for river restoration by reminding communities in a meaningful way of the heritage beneath their feet. And indeed we

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<sup>134</sup> <http://www.therrc.co.uk/uk-projects-map>.

<sup>135</sup> <http://www.wandletrust.org>.

should remember them before it's too late: Richard Jefferies warned of the apocalypse that awaits if we don't take care of our rivers 'As no care was taken with the brooks, the hatches upon them gradually rotted...flooding the lower grounds, which became swamps...and marshes'<sup>136</sup> (*After London*, 1885).

This research exercise has demonstrated that writers from Chaucer to Dickens can indeed remind us where the hidden rivers of London flow but they may also warn us of the consequences of forgetting them. As Fanthorpe said:

At our feet they lie low,  
The little fervent underground  
Rivers of London...  
**...Being of our world they will return**  
(*Rising Damp* U A Fanthorpe)

*10114 words*

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<sup>136</sup> Jefferies p.6.

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# Appendix

## Research methodology - outline

- Consultation

Initial consultation with the Environment Agency and search of River Restoration Centre website;

Subsequent consultation with local history societies, local study units/libraries.

- Literature survey

Analysis of literature of lost rivers of London;

Finding primary literature indicated by some of this secondary work; use of river name word search related to some key authors, based on reading as above and some London authors.

- Field walking

Walking the river routes focussed on in the exhibition; participation in guided walks during the Totally Thames Festival;

Meeting authors of various 'Lost Rivers' books and subsequent correspondence;

Plotting routes of rivers on OS maps and tracing route on the ground; observation of street names, property names to confirm route;

Observation of Lord Mayor's River Pageant and Show.

- Panel preparation for exhibition – sourcing maps, paintings, portraits;

Visits to archives and museums to find maps, paintings, portraits and other images relevant to the enquiry.

Sourcing materials for exhibition including music;

Photographing places during field work to illustrate exhibition.

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