

Wed. 13th June: Curiosities of the City of London – Stuart Robinson

Stuart started off with a brief resume of the history of London (pre City as we know it today) from Romans, through Saxons and Vikings up to the Blitz. His curiosities were probably not what members were expecting him to talk about but none the less they were an interesting cross section of City history.

He started with the first Fire of London caused by the sacking of Roman London by Boudicca in 60AD. As a result of this Gaius Julius Alpinus Classicianus was appointed procurator to restore the finances and to rebuild the city. When he died in 65AD his wife erected a tombstone in his honour. This stone was ultimately broken up to build the mediaeval walls of the city and archaeologists have recovered enough to enable them to ascertain to whom it was dedicated and understand through the Annals of Tacitus his actions in restoring Roman London. It may now be seen in the British Museum

He then moved to the second Fire of London known to the audience as the Great Fire of 1666. The Fire, starting in Pudding Lane in a baker's shop (hence the Monument) jumped the Fleet River although it was 30ft wide and was only stopped at Pie Corner, having destroyed $\frac{3}{4}$ of the City in 5 days, by the wind changing direction. Stuart drew our attention to a small wooden figure at Cock Lane near Pie Corner where the fire ended. Blamed was directed at foreigners or Catholics, but some said it was divine retribution for going from a devout Cromwellian administration to the dissolute reign of Charles II.

Drinking fountains were his next topic. Dr John Snow (commemorated now by a Soho pub) discovered the polluted water supply caused outbreaks of cholera. In 1859 Samuel Gurney MP opened the first public fountain providing clean drinking water, preferable to gin or beer! This fountain is to be found still in the wall of St Sepulchre-without-Newgate opposite the Old Bailey.

He next gave a gruesome account of a condemned man's final hours on his way to the scaffold and the derivation of some of the expressions in common parlance today that result from those practices. Public executions were carried out at Tyburn, roughly Marble Arch today. They were popular events with many thousands paying to view the spectacle and popular also with doctors who were able to obtain bodies for dissection. The expression "to go west" comes from this era as the prison was at Newgate, near the Old Bailey and Tyburn was west. Also the condemned (and there may have been many) were allowed to stop at some hostelry to have a final drink, known as "one for the road". The driver of the wagon carrying the guilty had to stay with his wagon and was not allowed a drink, hence "on the wagon". Was that the first drink – drive legislation? And finally to expedite the death by hanging, a rather inexact science at that time, friends or family were encouraged to hang on the feet of the guilty. These were known as "hangers on".

Postman's Park and the Watts Cloister was the next subject. G.F. Watts, an eminent painter and socialist, was disillusioned with the fact that only the rich had monuments raised in their honour when they died. His cloister contains 53 Doulton tiles commemorating the brave deeds of ordinary people who died saving others. This cloister may be seen at St. Botolph's Aldersgate, off St Martin's le Grand.

On a building on the corner of Eastcheap and Philpot Lane there is an interesting Italianate building of the Victorian era, formerly used to store herbs but these days of course used as offices. If you look very carefully you will find two little mice fighting over a piece of cheese, all done in plaster. No one knows why it is there.

And in celebration of its 250th anniversary he told us the mysterious ghost story of Cock Lane that turned out to be not a ghost story but a story of usury and non-payment of the debt, marriage and living in sin, death and a general tale of deceit by all concerned. But it attracted hordes to the Lane including Samuel Johnson who came up with the name of “Scratching Fanny of Old London Town” to identify one of the miscreants. The whole shoddy affair came to court and it was proved that the usurer, Mr Kent was innocent and his landlord Mr Parsons, to whom he had lent money, was guilty. But the building is no longer there though Cock Lane is to be found near Smithfield Market.

Jeremy Oldershaw