

## THE CITY'S RIVERS — THE WALBROOK AND THE FLEET

Whilst this paper concentrates upon the Walbrook and the Fleet, London owes its existence to the Thames. Since the end of the last ice age, the Thames has always provided easy access to the rich lowland of the British Isles. It is not surprising that the Thames Valley, with its well drained gravels and fertile silts has attracted settlers since the time of the Neolithic farmers.

A matter of more recent concern, which would not have troubled the early settlers, is the rising level of the Thames. In relation to the surrounding land the river high water level is three to four metres higher than in Roman times. However, it is to be expected that for the foreseeable future, the remarkable engineering project of the Thames Barrier will protect London from exceptionally high tides. In the long term, the Barrier is not adequate to cope with the problem.

John Stow does not report any concern about rising water levels, and refers to the Thames in this way. 'Thames, the most famous river of this Island, beginneth a little above the village of Winchcombe in Oxfordshire, and still increasing, passeth first by the University of Oxford, and so with a marvellous quiet course to London, and thence breaketh into the French Ocean by main tides, which twice in four and twenty hours doth ebb and flow more than sixty miles in length, to the great commodity of travellers. By the which all kinds of merchandise be easily conveyed to London'.

A traveller proceeding up river some two or three thousand years ago would have noticed on the north bank, in the area of the present City, two low hills with a shallow stream running between them, also immediately upstream of the second hill a river. The two hills are of course Ludgate Hill and Cornhill, and the rivers, the Walbrook and the Fleet.

William Fitzstephen, a Londoner himself and secretary to Archbishop Becket, wrote that 'to the north of the City are fields and pastures, and a delightful plain of meadow land, interspersing with flowing streams, on which stand mills, whose clack is very pleasing to the ear'. It would have been into this green and pleasant land, now the Borough of Islington, formerly Finsbury, that the City merchants and the archers of The Guild of St. George, the forerunner of the Honourable Artillery Company, would have stepped to practise their skills.

The rivers and streams, now covered over or stopped up, were very relevant to the life and development of London, making an important contribution to the social and industrial structure of a thriving city. The Walbrook and the Fleet provided not only water for domestic use, but also power to drive mills. Millers, tanners and leatherworkers took advantage of this natural resource. As recently as spring 1989 twenty five Saxon millstones were discovered on the

north bank of the Thames, just east of Southwark Bridge, very near where the mouth of the Walbrook would have been.

In Roman times these streams were a source of fresh water, not least for their bath houses, and a number of the more important dwellings were built on the banks of the Walbrook. The streams and springs continued to supply water until the thirteenth century, but by the sixteenth, Stow is writing 'the sweet and fresh waters are decayed, and other means are sought to supply fresh water'.

Slowly the Walbrook and the Fleet disappeared, their fate being sealed when the City grew beyond the Wall, swallowing farms, villages, streams, all in its wake. The drying river beds became roads; drains flowed into rivers and streams, turning them to sewers; open sewers became culverts.

A discussion of the City's rivers cannot overlook Stow's reference to the Langbourne as a stream breaking out of the ground in Fenchurch Street. Whilst the Walbrook had several tributaries, one running under Guildhall in the twelfth century, later writers reject any suggestion that a stream rose in Fenchurch Street. It would have meant that the stream ran uphill for part of its course, and no traces of its bed have ever been found during excavation. Even Stow admits that there was no sign of the stream remaining in his time.

It is thought that Langbourn Ward took its name not from a stream, but from the thirteenth century version of Lombard, Langebord or Langebrod.

## **THE WALBROOK**

The Walbrook running from north of the Wall down to the Thames had two main tributaries. The western source in Islington ran down the line of City Road, powering a lead mill at the City Road Turnpike until the early nineteenth century. At the Wall, it passed into the City through a culvert. The eastern source in Hoxton flowed down the line of Hackney Road, under Liverpool Street station and again through the Wall by a culvert.

The eastern culvert was uncovered during building work in 1842 and matches Stow's description of the western culvert. It was found at a depth of nineteen feet, and at the north end was an arch with iron bars to prevent rubbish and weeds choking the culvert. This arch had evidently been above ground at one time since quantities of moss still adhered to the masonry. It is not surprising that the fields north of the Wall were very marshy, since the two culverts for the Walbrook were undoubtedly frequently blocked and insufficient to drain the area. The building of the Wall had seriously interfered with the flow of the streams from the high ground in the north. Moorfields was frequently flooded, and according to Fitzstephen, the youth of London skated there in winter.

The two streams joined under Drapers' Hall, and the Walbrook ran under

Angel Court, the site of several mediaeval tanneries, continued to the east end of St. Margaret Lothbury, under the Bank of England, and on under the kitchen of Grocers' Hall. The stream then curved west to Poultry, having passed under the church of St. Mildred, which had been rebuilt in 1456 on an arch over the stream, continued under Bucklersbury, running to the west of the street which bears its name, and then followed almost a straight line down to the Thames at Dowgate Dock.

There is no certainty about the origin of the name Walbrook. It possibly comes from the Old English word 'Wealas' which meant stream of the Briton. Another popular derivation is from the Anglo Saxon word, 'Wahl' meaning stranger or foreigner. Stow's practical and simple suggestion is that it is the brook by the Wall!

The Walbrook divided the Roman city in two. This boundary remained a significant feature, since in the Middle Ages the City Ordinances determined that, in the selection of juries, eighteen men must be chosen from the east side of the Walbrook and eighteen from the west. At one time the Walbrook determined accurately part of the ward boundaries of Dowgate, Walbrook itself and Broad Street to the east, and Vintry, Cordwainer, Cheap and Coleman Street to the west. A reader of Stow will also notice that he describes the wards of the east separately from the wards of the west.

For the Romans the Walbrook was an abundant source of relatively fresh water, and many of the more prominent buildings were constructed on its banks. Not least there was the Governor's Palace near the east bank not far from the Dock. Further, it was during an excavation across the Walbrook valley that the Temple of Mithras was discovered, the ruins having been moved to present day ground level near the original site. The discovery of Roman bath houses also coincides with the course of the stream, and the Cheapside bath house was very close to a small tributary.

The banks of the Walbrook continued in later years to attract many of the more important buildings, several churches and many livery halls being built along the line of the stream. The churches of St. Margaret Lothbury, St. Mildred Poultry, St. John the Baptist, and St. Stephen were all by the stream, St. Margaret and St. Mildred both on arches right over the Walbrook. At one time the water of the Walbrook washed the walls of the original St. Stephen, the present church being a little further to the east.

There is considerable doubt about the width and depth of the Walbrook. One reads of the Dowgate torrents falling into the Thames, and of the stream being navigable almost up to the Wall on the north side of the City. It is also reported that the keel and other parts of a boat were found when digging foundations at the south east corner of Moorgate. However, this would not be the first time that timber remains were wrongly identified as a boat, over-

lapping planking sometimes being used in revetting river banks. On the other hand, it is evident from a lawsuit in the fourteenth century, that there was enough water in the area of the north wall to float a boat with six passengers.

The highest point at which the Walbrook is believed to have been navigable is Bucklersbury, to a building referred to as the Old Barge, itself probably built next to or on the same site as Buckle's manor house. The barges possibly tied up to the backs of the houses situated on the west side of Walbrook, the street. Current thinking is that the Walbrook was never more than fifteen feet wide and very shallow, some researchers having been misled by interpreting discoveries of the flood plain remains as being the bed of the river itself.

As with any possession, there was the question of maintenance and the Walbrook was no exception: rubbish clearance, sewerage, maintenance of banks and bridges were all a constant problem for the City fathers, and also for those who lived on or near the stream. The aldermen were not spared a direct involvement.

At a Court of Common Council on Wednesday, 6 May 1383, it was agreed as follows 'watercourse of Walbrook is stopped up by divers filth and dung thrown therein by persons who have houses along the said course. The aldermen of the wards of Coleman Street, Broad Street, Cheap, Walbrook, Vintry and Dowgate are to let the Chamberlain know of those throwing filth or rubbish into the watercourse, the said aldermen to make enquiry how many latrines there are upon the said course, and to whom they belong, and to certify the said Mayor and Chamberlain as to the same'! It was quite in order to have a latrine over the river on paying two shillings annually to the Chamberlain.

The Walbrook may long ago have disappeared, but it has yielded abundant treasure in coins, tools, pottery and probably most mysterious of all, the collection of skulls found along its course. The skulls have far outnumbered the full skeletons. Coins of issues in a continuous sequence up to 155 were discovered in the river bed in considerable quantities. In spite of the fact that there were many subsequent issues, few coins were found there of later date. This coincides with the collapse of the banks of the Walbrook at that time and consequent flooding.

Some believe that water from the Walbrook can, at times of heavy rain, be seen on the foreshore between Cannon Street railway bridge and Southwark Bridge. Disappointingly, this water is likely to be no more than the overflow relief of the Thames Water Authority's drainage system. Also, it was a disappointment to find that the water dripping from the roof in the area of the new tunnelling for the Docklands Light Railway extension, and in very close proximity to the bed of the Walbrook, is not from the course of the ancient stream.

## THE FLEET

A glance over the river wall at Blackfriars Bridge reveals a cavernous opening flanked by two water outfalls with one way traps. This opening is all that remains of the Fleet, not even a suspicion of a current at low water springs.

The word Fleet has an Anglo Saxon origin, meaning a tidal inlet, and generally referred to the river as far as Holborn Bridge. The river which provided transport for corn, wine, firewood, cheese, paving stones, and stone for building the Old St. Paul's no longer exists. Sometimes patients for St. Bartholomew's Hospital used the Fleet, the Hospitallers of St. John allowing very sick people to land at their quay by Fleet Lane.

Sometimes known as the Holbourne or Turnmill Brook, the two tributaries rise at Hampstead and at Kenwood Highgate, join at Camden Town, and flow on to King's Cross, Clerkenwell and Farringdon Road. In addition to the source water of the two main tributaries, the Fleet is fed by several other smaller tributaries and by several wells, St. Pancras, Clerkenwell and others.

Being a natural barrier, the Fleet became part of London's defences against the Royalists in 1643. Enormous earthworks were constructed along the river. One newspaper reported:—

'Many thousands of men and women, their children and servants, went out of the several parishes of London with spades, shovels, pickaxes and baskets, and drums and colours before them; some of the chief men of every parish marching before them, and so went into the fields, and worked hard all day digging and making trenches from fort to fort . . . and late at night the company came back in like manner they went out, and the next day many more went, and so they continued daily, with such cheerfulness that the whole will be finished ere many days'.

Continuing down Farringdon Road, the river came to Turnmill Street, the site of several watermills. The river was described in an advertisement in the Daily Courant of 1741 as a 'good stream and current that will turn a mill to grind hair powder or liquerish or other things'. This was presumably an extract from estate agent's particulars!

The Fleet passed close to the Smithfield market area where the slaughterhouses and tanneries turned the Fleet red. These two activities led to many complaints from neighbours, resulting in slaughtering being moved to the King's Cross district.

Henry Lacey, Earl of Lincoln, reported to Parliament that, 'whereas in times past the river Fleet had been of such a depth and breadth that ten or twelve ships with merchandise were wont to come to Fleet Bridge, and some of them to Old Bourne Bridge, now the same course, by the filth of the tanneries and

such others, and by the raising of wharfs is stopped up'. The Fleet had indeed become an open sewer and a linear rubbish dump.

The Fleet continued south past the coal wharves, in the area of Seacoal Lane, Newcastle Lane and Fleet Lane, and on to the Thames, on its way providing water for the moat round Fleet Prison on the east side of Farringdon Street.

A word on Fleet marriages is not out of place here. These clandestine marriages were performed without licence in the chapel of the Fleet Prison, and from the beginning of the eighteenth century in nearby taverns and houses. Many taverns had signs depicting clasped male and female hands with the words 'Marriages Performed Within'. These marriages were invariably performed by clergymen in Fleet Prison for debt, but who were granted the liberties of the Fleet. The Keeper of the prison was very accommodating to those who provided an appropriate consideration. Fleet marriages were eliminated by Lord Hardwicke's Marriage Act 1753.

The Fleet was tidal as far as Holborn Bridge. The lower main bridge was the Fleet Bridge, described by Stow as 'a bridge of stone, fair coped on either side with iron pikes, on the which towards the south, be also certain lanthorns of stone, for lights to be placed on winter evenings, for commodity of travellers'.

At one time the mouth of the Fleet is believed to have been six hundred feet wide. It was by the mouth that the remains of a Roman barge were found in 1962, complete with some of its cargo of Kentish ragstone.

It is believed that it was probably carrying stone for building the western side of the City wall. The vessel had probably been built in the earlier part of the second century, since a worn copper coin of 89 had been placed on the mast step for luck. The coin was not new and had clearly been selected for its reverse side, representing the goddess Fortuna holding a ship's rudder.

By the seventeenth century the Fleet had become impassable for boats, because of encroachment and the dumping of rubbish. All the houses and warehouses that had stood on its banks were swept away by the Great Fire, the flames leaping from one side of the river to the other.

After the Fire, the river was deepened from Holborn Bridge to the Thames, and the banks constructed of brick and stone, the whole building was becoming an architectural monument. A new bridge was erected by Wren at Holborn. This enterprise, known as the New Canal, was completed at vast expense, and largely because of the consequent high toll charges, the volume of traffic dwindled to nothing. In 1733, not long after Wren's death, the river from Holborn Bridge to Fleet Bridge was arched over. The wharves became streets; the canal became a long covered market. It was in 1754 that sand from the filthy Fleet was used to lag paving stones instead of cleaner sand from the

Thames, and the newly paved streets became disastrously slippery. In 1766 the lower stretch down to the Thames was also covered in. Sadly, the Fleet had now been confirmed as a sewer.

It had taken over fifteen hundred years to destroy what must have been two delightful streams. We will never see them again, but perhaps the Barbican lake is a tribute to their memory, and also a reminder that there was once a natural pool by St. Giles.

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