

FLEET STREET

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Fellow Travellers In Time (for that is what we all are in the context of the City of London and of its western gateway, Fleet Street),

Historians will of course know the 'Street' was named after the River Fleet -- that tidal flow that empties into the Thames at Blackfriars Bridge. At the bottom of Fleet Street there was a ford with stepping stones to gain access to the City at the Ludgate. In those days the Fleet was navigable: coal ships sailed up the Fleet and discharged their coal at the Seacoal Lane. Watt Tyler was piloried at the top of Fleet Street. There it was that Sweeney Todd set up his Barber's shop at what is now called Hen & Chicken Court. His famous tilting chair conveyed his customers to the tunnel under the street where very good pies were sold in the shop opposite. Alsacia the no go area established after the dissolution of the monasteries and the abolition of the Whitefriars is just off Fleet Street and was accessed from Bram Alley now Hare Place opposite Fetter Lane. This area featured in the novel Forever Amber. In my time in Fleet Street I looked out on Peales hotel at the corner of Fetter Lane. Indelibly inscribed on its walls was a sign: 'Peales Hotel Rooms by the hour.' In the olden days Fleet Street was a bad place: it's for you to decide if it's any better now!

Fleet marriages

Fleet Marriages (1696-1753) were born out of the old Fleet Prison to help debt-ridden clergymen within and were eventually stopped because they had become a racket, often involving kidnapping, blackmail, rape and other crimes. Besides, they robbed the State of a goodly revenue from stamp duties on the marriage certificates.

While most inmates stood in turn in an iron cage to beg passers-by in a mournful voice to "Pray remember the poor debtors", the clergy inmates used the Fleet Prison chapel to celebrate marriages without banns or licences, to raise money and settle their debts. Outside the prison, touts pestered pedestrians to walk in and be married. At the height of the practice, thirty-two couples were joined in one day and in a period of four months, in 1704/1705, another 2,954 marriages took place. By the time Fleet Prison marriages were banned in 1712, the money-grubbing clergy claimed that territory outside the Prison was not affected by the ban and the marriage trade expanded first to neighbouring taverns, where some publicans kept resident Fleet parsons on tap for £1 a week.

Later, eighty nine Fleet parsons offered marriages to anyone in the kingdom in taverns and temples spread through the City to the east and to the Strand and Mayfair to the West, bringing in the total of unlicensed nuptials to 8,000 a year, a third of the national total. The Reverend John Mottram was said to earn £2,000 from the trade; the Reverend Walter Wyatt (chasing customers through the town, even down Piccadilly) £500. The Reverend Dare backdated one marriage from 1741 to 1723 to oblige a customer; another kept nine different registers to fool others, while parsons like one

known as “the Bishop of Hell” kept professional husbands handy to marry any pregnant girl in a hurry.

“The Street of Ink, the Street of Drink, the Street of Shame, the Street of Fame”

Wynkin De Worde set up his printing Press in Salisbury Square close by St Bride’s Church in 1530 from then on the printed word spilled out. Fleet Street’s golden era lasted for nearly 100 years from 1896 when the newspaper industry was a thriving and fascinating *disorganisation*. My grandfather set himself up as a free Vintner at No 47 in 1915. He was followed by my uncle Frank he of the flowery waistcoat and green carnation and I have been there now for some 45 years. I have seen the rise and demise of this great street: they say that if every other shop had been a drinking establishment they would all have made a good living for drink not ink was Fleet Street’s lifeblood.

Why, you may ask, this sudden explosion of the printed word? Around the turn of the century the UK had achieved near universal literacy, people wanted to know what was going on in the world around them, they wanted to know about the Rich & Famous, scandal, (and there was plenty of that,) the arts, the shows and a myriad other things: this was before Radio, TV, Cinema and other modern diversions.

The arrival of your daily newspaper on your breakfast table became a must and Fleet Street was there to fill that need. All the famous titles and many more long gone were established between 1760 and 1900. The Times for instance was first published in 1785; the Observer in 1791; the Telegraph in 1885; the Manchester Guardian in 1855.

How did the mass circulation of the daily newspaper come about?

It was the introduction of the Koenig Steam Press in 1814 that made it all possible. Obtained from Germany and built in great secrecy, for the printers were even in those days violently opposed to change of any modernising innovation, this machine could turn out 4,000 sheets per hour, a massive increase on the old hand presses’ that could only manage 250 sheets per hour. Subsequently with the advent of the Hoe Rotary press and the linotype machines and the hot and metal process in 1892, the great days of the press Barons were well and truly founded. Harold Harmsworth launched the Daily Mail in 1896 at ½ d a copy. On the first day, it sold 397,215 copies more than any other paper had sold in any one day, whilst his brother Alfred bought the moribund London Evening News for £23,000 and was soon selling more evening papers than any other in the whole world. I won’t dwell any more on the Harmsworth fortune as Historian Joyce Nash dealt with these in her paper about the News Chronicle.

Meanwhile the Observer (founded in 1791) passed to the Harmsworths, the Astors Atlantic Burchfield, and Tiny Rowland. The Telegraph (launched in 1885) by Camrose passed to the Berry Family to Conrad Black In 1903, The Mirror launched by Harmsworth passed to Cecil King to the Cudlips and then on to Maxwell. The Times (started in 1785) passed to the Berrys, Camrose, Astors Thompsons & Murdoch. The News of the World (founded in 1843) passed from the Bells to the

Carrs to Murdoch. The Express owned by Beaverbrook then his son Sir Max Aitken to Trafalgar House, Victor Matthews, and United News. The Financial Times passed from the Camrose family to the Pearson Group headed by Lord Cowdray. There are many other papers not mentioned here that started up, shone for a while, were bought up by a competitor and closed down: this is but a snap shot of the old and new Press Barons. It is interesting to see the same families cropping up many times over.

The power of the unions

When computer inputting came along the unions resisted its introduction and the new equipment stood idle for years. They would allow new technology so long as it did not affect their traditional working practices. If a new machine was set in motion that required ½ the number of staff to man it then the union insisted that the old full complement be employed i.e. 40 men were paid for and only 20 needed, the spare 20 went off to work at another newspaper and the 20 left to work the machine shared 40 wage packets between them. This practice was called double banking: there were numerous such practices where men were paid to do nothing.

In the early days the Press Barons tended to turn a blind eye to these goings on in the mistaken opinion that if they were doing well the workforce should be doing well also. It also meant that labour disputes were kept to a minimum and full production was maintained: these Barons were great newspaper people but very poor businessmen. Of course this situation could not continue for ever and the more business minded Proprietors such as Rupert Murdoch started preparing for a move and a show down with the unions.

Four essential events started the move from Fleet Street:

- Eddy Shah -- because he set up in Washington using the latest technology to produce a national newspaper without union labour
- Reuters -- because the newspaper Proprietors bought heavily into Reuters when it was first floated and saw their shares soar to be worth hundreds of millions of pounds.
- Land values -- which had taken off in Fleet Street. What really triggered this was the sale of the old Boys school site
- Margaret Thatcher – for outlawing secondary picketing

At that time, many Proprietors were quietly buying sites in Docklands and elsewhere to build printing works. Murdoch constructed fortress Wapping and in great secrecy moved his entire operation overnight using an external union with a no strike deal, having first separated his Fleet Street operation from Wapping so any union unrest would be classed as secondary picketing and illegal. It was a traumatic yet exhilarating time for the industry and marked the end of Fleet Street as we knew it.