

LEADENHALL – THE MARKET AT THE HEART OF THE CITY

Read by Sir David Howard

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To misquote GK Chesterton, Before the Roman came to Rye or out to Severn strode, he came marching up from the far end of Kent, he and 40,000 fellow Romans, headed by a distinguished general, the future emperor Vespasian, they forded the Thames and set up an encampment on the north bank. From these origins in AD 43 the new settlement grew rapidly. Already by the reign of Nero, twenty years later, Tacitus tells us that London was famous for trade and the concourse of merchants. Around the end of that first century the capital of the province was moved here from Colchester, and from that point it boasted one of the greatest forums in the empire, the centre of trading in the City. On its north side stood the great Basilica, the largest building in the empire north of the Alps.

And then, in the Middle Ages this epicentre of the City, high on Cornhill, became our largest general market, again the centre of trading, in and around a new building that was the equal of Guildhall in size and in architecture. It survived the Great Fire and grew further by absorbing other markets which didn't. And then, a century and a half ago it was rebuilt by our impressive City Architect Sir Horace Jones. Leadenhall is a sort of alpha and omega, as it were, the very first of our street markets, and today it's the very last.

Leadenhall is the stuff of London legend. This is supposedly where Bob Cratchit bought the goose on Christmas Eve to take home to his family in Camden Town. And where Scrooge, after his ghostly experiences, repaid the compliment by buying the turkey. And it features large in Harry Potter. So when you browse the mixture of quaint and modern shops in the market you have this microcosm of the entire history of the City of London stretching down, layer after layer under your feet. And the romance of the City all around you.

Over the years distinguished fellow historians have addressed us on the subject of Smithfield, and Billingsgate and Spitalfields. Yet, as far as I can see, no one has yet talked about Leadenhall.

There is more in this historical treasure-chest than I could possibly cover in 20 minutes, so I can only pick out some of the brightest jewels. And one of the most surprising things is how recent much of the historical discovery is.

The great Roman Basilica only came to light in the 1880s, when Sir Horace Jones rebuilt the market. But far more has only come to light in the past fifteen or twenty years. No doubt there is much more to come.

I'm heavily reliant on a number of sources, and these include the Survey of the Public Markets in 1677 covered so admirably by our own Betty Masters in 1974, and the very detailed description by the team at the Museum of London of the conclusions of the archaeological work at the Leadenhall Court site in 1986-87. I will be drawing on both of these.

The original Roman settlement in AD 43 was quite small, the northern edge was only as far north as Cornhill, and it included no forum. We know little of those first few years, but in recent months the Bloomberg site, by the Mansion House, has thrown up evidence that, right from the outset, the new settlement was called Londinium. You will know that what then transformed London was Boadicea, in 60 or 61. The new settlement had been growing rapidly and following the devastation of the revolt it was now rebuilt and expanded. This rebuilding project included the first forum which was laid out at the northern edge of the original settlement, the highest point in the settlement, at Cornhill. The forum was a fairly modest rectangular open space, built between the years 70 and 80. This was to be the new centre of trading in this expanding town.

By the year 98, just 55 years after the invasion, the population of London had reached around 60,000. I choose this year as it marked the accession of the emperor Trajan, who visited London and who was a considerable benefactor. Trajan followed the new trend of beautifying imperial cities with magnificent public buildings and fine monuments. So it's no surprise that within a year or two of his accession a much grander re-building programme was undertaken in this important provincial capital. Over a period of about 30 years the forum was hugely expanded, to something like two-thirds the size of Trafalgar Square. It was vast. And all along the north side, by what is now Cornhill and Leadenhall Street, a great three-storeyed basilica was erected, principally as administrative offices. Long buildings ranged along the other three sides, enclosing this enormous forum, arcaded at street level, and with the principal gate facing towards Eastcheap – east market – in the south. This was the trading centre of the Roman city, with shops in the buildings around the forum and street trading in the forum itself.

Trajan's reign was arguably the economic high water mark for the empire, from which it then began its long decline. The evidence suggests that, unlike continental cities which were more embedded in their surrounding community, Roman London was rather like modern Dubai. A sort of self-contained trading city with very little official hinterland. Its economy relied almost entirely on trade and the taxes on trade. As the empire itself declined and the flow of external trade decreased, the economy of London seems to have disintegrated.

This led in turn to a cycle of population decline with people moving out to the typically Roman semi-autonomous villa estates which dominated the rural economy. After a major fire in the mid-3rd century one of the sources says that "it seems that the basilica had entered a cycle of terminal decline."

It was Roman policy to demolish redundant public buildings, but only in the past 30 years have we learned that almost the whole of the building was taken down in around 300. The footings were left, just above ground level, but much of the stone here, and below ground, was later taken. The basilica, the forum and the building around it were cleared and the site became fields, under cultivation. The footings remained below ground, as some of them still do today. You can see some of the masonry in the basement of the barbers shop at 90 Gracechurch Street. And there are remnants further down, under the market itself and in Whittington Avenue and under Leadenhall Court next door. But these were lost to sight for 1700 years, and soon the memory of this great building was lost.

As I have said, so much of our knowledge of the Leadenhall site has only been discovered in the past 20 or 30 years. As recently as 1985 one of the leading experts on the subject told us that there was no evidence at all for when the Basilica fell out of use. But within two or three years of that the excavations at Leadenhall Court told us quite clearly what had happened, and when.

We know almost nothing of this large site during the Saxon and Norman periods. A few odds and ends have been discovered by the archaeologists but nothing that gives us much of a clue. Both St Michael's, Cornhill, and St Peter Upon Cornhill, on the corner of Gracechurch street, lie directly above the Basilica. But the evidence suggests that St Michael's post-dates the Norman Conquest. On the other hand St Peter's dates back possibly to AD 700 and popular legend suggests that it was founded on the northern edge of the Forum by a senior Roman officer during a gap in the Persecutions, as far back as the year 189.

Modern Leadenhall Market itself lies above the arcading of the north-east corner of the Forum.

In 1997 the newspaper the Independent reported that that there has been continuous street trading on the Leadenhall site since the Roman period. But while the earlier market here went right back to the beginning of Roman Britain, there will have been a break of at least 100 to 150 years on the Leadenhall site. During this interval the Anglo-Saxon tribes settled and began trading north, east and west outside the City walls, but principally in Aldwych. But the very name Cheapside tells us that the markets had started moving back inside the walls well before Alfred the Great made London his capital in 886. And there were markets all along this thoroughfare, which from an early date are likely

to have continued eastwards into Cornhill.

The recorded history picks up again with one of the City's wealthiest merchants, a Norman land-owner called Henry de Cornhill who lived from 1135 to 1193. His father Gervase was Sheriff of London for much of the period from 1155 to 1161 and Gervase married Agnes, the daughter of Edward de Cornhill. Their son Henry enjoyed the favour of King Richard the Lion Heart and spent some of his great fortune assembling the fleet of 40 ships and 1000 men for the Third Crusade. Henry himself was Sheriff of London from 1187 to 1189. You will notice the date, 1189, which marks the first appearance of the Anglo-Saxon merchant Henry Fitz-Aylwin as Mayor of London.

If you think that London's cosmopolitan and tolerant nature is only a few centuries old let me tell you about a group of entrepreneurs who clubbed together to develop plots of land in the City at this time. They were the Norman Sheriffs, Gervase and his son Henry de Cornhill; the Anglo-Saxon Peter Fitz-Aylwyn, the son of the Mayor; and the wealthiest Jewish merchant in England, Aaron of Lincoln. We know that one of the plots of land developed by this successful partnership lay between Aaron's house in Lothbury and the River Walbrook, nearby.

The connection with Leadenhall is that Henry de Cornhill owned this site too. One of the crusading knights attached to his household was called Sir Hugh de Neville, and in about 1195 Sir Hugh married Henry de Cornhill's daughter and heir Joan. During the next 100 years the Nevilles built a huge hall roughly on the site of the old Basilica, and covered it with a leaden roof. The Neville's hall itself was similar in size and design to Penshurst Place in Kent. It was spectacular. There was a similar open hearth with a hole in the roof above it. And the floor was raised at one end for the host and special guests. The first mention of the name Leadenhall appears nearly 100 years later, in documents dating from 1296.

According to Betty Masters the Neville family were already permitting poultry and vendors of country produce to have their stalls on the private land around the hall during the course of the 14th century. By the end of that century, around 1394, the last of the Nevilles died, the estate changed hands, and 14 years later, in 1408, we are told by Stow that the Leaden Hall was conveyed to none other than Richard Whittington and the citizens of London. And then in 1411, at the end of his third mayoralty, Dick Whittington conveyed it to the Mayor and Commonalty of London, in whose hands the site has resided to this very day.

This was rapidly followed, in 1419, by the building of the City's granary, a huge stone building broadly on the site of the former Basilica. This was privately financed by a wealthy City merchant called Simon Eyre in the

run-up to being elected Lord Mayor. At about this time it's believed that the market was trading in wool, linen cloth and metal-ware, as well as poultry, meat and fish.

There was a major building project by the City Corporation itself between 1440 and 1455, some of it on additional land which the Corporation acquired in Gracechurch Street. This resulted in the market, the granary and the chapel next door fronting a four-sided court, together with the original manor house. The entrance was from Leadenhall Street, which at that time was still called Cornhill. The big house itself actually burned down in 1484, but the market was rapidly rebuilt and it went from strength to strength. In 1488 it was granted a monopoly for selling leather. In 1503 Common Council decreed that Frenchmen and Foreigners could sell their wares nowhere in the City but at Leadenhall. There were days and times at which members of the public could bring their produce to sell freely in the market and others on which only authorised traders were allowed. In 1622 Leadenhall acquired a monopoly for selling cutlery. It was already the largest market in the City for general produce. From 1582 it housed a conduit which was fed by a waterwheel in one of the arches of London Bridge. This fed the surrounding City by gravity, and this, and its replacement, following the Great Fire, remained in place until demolition of the bridge commenced in 1823. In 1534 Richard Gresham lighted on Leadenhall as a possible site for his new Exchange but after debate, Stow tells us, "it was fully concluded that the bourse should remain in Lombard Street, as before, and Leadenhall no more to be spoken of concerning that matter". At that time the upper floors of the buildings stored wool for export, and all the accoutrements for City pageants, together with an arsenal for the defence of the City.

The other famous tenant in Leadenhall Street, historically, was the East India Company to which the Queen granted a charter in 1600. This merits a separate talk, so I shall only say that the very grand East India Company spent its first 18 years at the Nag's Head, opposite St Botolph's, Bishopsgate and then moved in 1618 to the three-storeyed buildings on the west and northern sides of the Leadenhall Market courtyard. Its annual rent was £66. It then remained on or close to this site all the way until it was wound up following its effective nationalisation in 1874.

The Great Fire caused fairly limited damage to the market but other markets needed a new home. So Leadenhall was re-built, now in three sections, all under a roof. The first section sold beef, leather, wool and hides. The second veal, mutton, lamb, fish, cheese and poultry and the third fruit and vegetables.

Stow records that at Christmas a tree would be erected on the pavement, decorated with holly and ivy, thus somewhat pre-dating Prince Albert's introduction to England of the Christmas tree. I well remember as a boy the

excitement every Christmas of my father bringing home what he always claimed was the largest turkey in the market. He always reserved this weeks in advance from George Butcher, who I well remember on the north side of the main aisle in from Gracechurch Street.

Our turkeys had a rather less happy fate than Old Tom, the celebrated gander from Belgium, who somehow escaped being slaughtered along with 34,000 other geese at Christmas 1797. Tom would waddle around the market in between the poultry stalls, being fed at the various hostelrys, and he finally died at the great age of 37 years and 9 months in 1835. He lay in state in the market before being buried on the site.

One of the strangest things sold at the market in the 19th century were bags of live foxes, brought in from France. The success of gamekeepers in reducing the fox population in England had a marked effect on foxhunting. So the foxes would be purchased at Leadenhall and released for the hunt to pursue.

Finally I will say a few words on the present market building. I remember when the market was still predominantly dedicated to its original trades, and most of all I remember all the poultry. Now of course, in addition to the traditional pubs – The Lamb, The New Moon, The Swan and Old Tom’s Bar, it houses a variety of restaurants and quite upmarket retail shops. It remains one of the largest shopping centres within the City, all within or around the edges of Horace Jones’s series of iconic market passages. Before Horace Jones the market was essentially built in stone. You will all be familiar with the ornate wrought iron structure which replaced this, in its splendid Victorian colours of green, maroon and cream.

This project was undertaken in 1880-81 when Sir Horace Jones was in his early 60s, and three years before Tower Bridge. He had already re-built Billingsgate and the main buildings of Smithfield. For Leadenhall he took as a model the iconic Galleria Vittorio Emmanuele in Milan, the wonderful arcaded shopping centre that lies between the Cathedral and La Scala. As it happens, and you may have just read this in the Financial Times, only two days ago the great and the good of Italy gathered for a grand dinner in the Galleria to mark its 150th anniversary. The Galleria was built to mark the unification of the new kingdom and this in turn was modelled on the sensational Crystal Palace from about 15 years earlier. But the Italians questioned the stability of glass walls, so the four quarter sections which support the great glass roof were built in masonry. The result is an amazing confection of Italian elegance.

Sir Horace repaid the compliment by adopting the same design principle, but of course on a smaller scale to reflect the cramped site: the buildings are two storeys high, not three, and the glass-roofed passageways are narrower than in the Galleria. But in both cases the passageways meet in a central crossroads

under a huge central glass dome. Yet unlike the airy Victorian marbled opulence of the Galleria, Leadenhall retains a strong sense of its origins as a street market, with its cobbles and paving stones and it feels warm and secretive and distinctly Dickensian.

So, this is where the ghosts of Christmas past, present and future dwell. Leadenhall encapsulates the history of London from the very beginning, on a site which is a fraction of the original size, with Roman and Mediaeval and Tudor London below it and pressing up against it the usual jumble of good, bad and indifferent high-rise 21st century London.

And there it sits, this extraordinary jewellery box of history, something we should all treasure.

And long may it continue.