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East of Bank

Michael Batty
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A Walk in the Year of the Lockdown

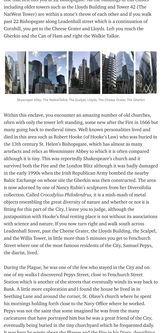
by Michael Batty


Bank and Beyond

For 25 years I have lived west of Bank, west of the Bank of England that is, but only 10 minutes' walk away, near St. Paul's Cathedral. When the Lockdown came on the 23rd March this year, I failed to get out of the City. My car was in one's and twos's up Bank and I was not prepared when the train, having walked to work in Bloomsbury since early March when it seemed to me that the Government was about to turn into madness. Part of the reason my aging diesel car was out of tests, was due to the Mayor of London's recently imposed low emission zone charges. Lockdown coincident with the congestion charge zone which was established back in 2003. Along everywhere, the combined charges are now £15 per day and our car well over £25 pounds a day and even before the Pandemic is showing signs of wheezing. The Mayor has encouraged cycling, but incidentally these restrictions appear to have worked, as congestion and pollution had been falling, albeit slowly, in the City long before the virus hit.

In fact it turned out that staying in the City — the square mile as it is called — was a good move. Some 7000 out of the 8000 who live here continue to be half million who commute in each day from all over London to work. The area is empty in the late evenings and at weekends. Which is why I was able to yourself, a massive infrastructure for a financial sector that is now largely deserted. Many of the City's place is dominated by medieval buildings, both ancient and modern back to Roman times, with a recent spate of quite high quality skyscraper buildings that are replacing the continuing redevelopment since the last financial crisis. During the Lockdown, it has been empty of life, the combined City population is normally 400 thousand. Apart from a succession of 'Zoom' and 'Teams' meetings, each evening when it is almost dark, I go for a run over the streets of Bank, where the area quite well but east in a complex of ancient streets and new skyscrapers. churches designed after the Great Fire of 1666 by Christopher Wren and Nicholas Hawksmoor. My knowledge of that part of the City has always been meagre and partial. The City of course is where the Romans pitched their camp when they came to AD43 and until the medieval period were begun to move west in the late 18th century, this was the place that saw all the action. The Royal Exchange and the Bank of England, respectively, a separate town, a little over 2 miles west of Bank where the rulers had established their residences some two centuries. The West End only began to thrive as the retail core in the 19th century.

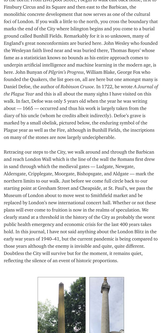
East of Bank was thus an unknown country as far as I was concerned so I decided I would use my evening walks to learn about the part of the City, now the heart of the financial district. As 8pm each evening for the last 6 weeks I have left my flat and walked to Bank either down Queen Victoria Street or Gresham Street. In the weeks I have been doing this, the nights have got lighter and then weather has been dry. The most interesting observation is how few people I encounter each night. It is fair to say that I see more bats than people, and the bases are invariably all empty apart from the occasional 'essential worker' travelling to or from work. It is remarkable that Transport for London are keeping the Tube services going with its virtually no passengers but the government have just hailed them out to the tune of £1.6 billion. Yet with relatively few people using the Tube, the signs of an inflation that is now certain to rock the world's economies once the lockdown ends, is apparent here. Here however the lockdown appears to have been rather successful and only now is there any debate about how we might all be released from it. Nevertheless, the City has been far enough to walk through an empty city and social distance from the occasional passerby that when lockdown began to end, escape to the country will become all too easy an option to ignore.


From Bank towards Bishopsgate

My enduring impression on these evening walks is the clarity of everything around me. For the first time I can see the buildings and streets, crowding in on each other, near and close and ordered,. They are well-ordered by the City Corporation whose continued maintenance of the pocket parks is admirable, looking better than they have ever looked before. With so few people and hardly any pollution, everything appears closer and crisper than it does when the streets are dense with people. Even on days of bad weather, the fall in pollution and the evening light have made everything crystal clear but there is little doubt that the City is returning in parts to a more natural habitat. Early on my walks just off Cheapside in the street called Old Jewry, I saw a fox on the pavement opposite, walking in the other direction to me, pleased as punch and strutting as proud as could be. I stood the place, similar sights which I have seen several times in these past few weeks. The silence of course is uncanny. You can hear the birds sing, and sometimes you can even hear someone having an occasional telephone conversation on the pavement. Some of the streets I walk down in the area where some 350 years ago, the last wave of the Great Plague hit London, and there is an eerie reminder to those past events in the reflects. Back then the minister Thomas Vincent in his book God's Terrible Voice In The City wrote about the darkness of the streets and empty places, especially within the walls, no rattling Coaches, no prancing Horses, no calling in Customers, no bustling Wares". This of course is a City where as many than one, King Charles II and his entourage removed first to Hampton Court in 1665 and then, those who followed, to Oxford, and eventually to Salisbury, and Isaac Newton left Cambridge for his family base at Woolsthorpe Manor where he penned the essential elements of his *Principia*.

On many of my walks, I have criss-crossed a city which in these days was surrounded by plague pits, just outside the walls of the town which had only to be followed by the Great Fire a year later in 1666. The Plague killed more than 100,000 people in London which was in total around a city of 350,000 and the Fire the year after destroyed two-thirds of the buildings in the City. No wonder one of the oldest quiet open spaces in the old walled area simply Monument', pictured below, was raised in memory of those awful events. It is still standing, remembering those who died in the Great Fire, and eventually in Salisbury, and Isaac Newton left Cambridge for his family base at Woolsthorpe Manor where he penned the essential elements of his *Principia*.

But back to Bank. This location is probably the true heart of the City, even of London itself although there is no geographical centre to the capital. Bank and Paul's Cathedral which is a stone's throw up Cheapside. Here the post roads converge which made the present day system of roads, based on the familiar 'A' roads, descending in radial fashion to Bank and St. Paul's which mark the historic core of communications and the origin of the roads which are fast merging together. If you start your walk at the Bank of England, you have four ways in which to go east. At the end of Bank the Londbury turns into Thregmorton Street, a pedestrianised street built mainly of Victorian, perhaps even Georgian buildings, that survived the Blitz Exchange on whose site the Gherkin was then constructed. The area is now adorned by one of Damien Hurlst's sculptures, the Physical Incentive collection. Called *Crucifixion Philodendron*, it is a mix of medical object resembling the shape of a crucifix, and a plant. Not sure what it is trying for this part of the City, I leave you to judge, although the juxtaposition with the Hotel Thregmorton and its luxury suites is associations with science and nature. If you now turn right and walk south across Lombard Street, past the Corn Exchange, the Leadenhall Building, the Gherkin and the Gas-el Ham and right the Walkie Talkie.


Robert Hooke's and Samuel Pepys's Final Resting Places in 1703: St Helen's and St Olave's

You can wander around this area endlessly there is so much history still visible. Below Fenchurch Street and is the east is the Tower of London and the Royal Mint and to the north of the Corporation area, the Liverpool Street, the only mainline station in the City which serves the north and east of the country. It is also the location of Bedlam, originally Saint Aldgate which is a hard boundary to the financial quarter. Here the buildings quickly become Victorian and Georgian and the streets are full graffiti are apparent, and the East End begins. If you ply your way to Liverpool Street along the north side of Threadneedle Street you can see the City moving north with many new high buildings in and around the station such as the Broadgate centre. It is fascinating to see how the City is slowly softening although this is not quite the right word for the City is encroaching on the old housing previously renowned Victorian buildings that once dominated industrial London up to the beginning of the second world war. It is here that you also see the effects of the bombing campaign of 1940 a ways. The Universities of Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Northumbria and Coventry have set up their joint presence in this area. As a result of it each these empty streets, I cannot but speculate on the fact that once the pandemic subsides and the economic crisis begins in earnest, all this will be swept away.

The City now almost reaches Old Street, no longer the responsibility of the City Corporation but of the boroughs of Hackney to the east and Islington to the north. From Liverpool Street, it begins to walk east back home, first to Bank, then to Cheapside and then to St. Paul's. Here is the heart of the monolithic concrete development that now serves as one of the cultural foci of London. If you walk to the north, you cross the boundary that marks the end of the City where Islington begins and you come to a burial ground called Bunhill Fields. Remarkably for it is an unknown, many of England's great nonconformists are buried here. John Wesley who founded the Wesleyan faith lived near and was buried there, Thomas Bayes' whose theorem is a mainstream known to bounds as his entire approach comes to underpin artificial intelligence and machine learning in the modern age, is here. John Bunyan of Pilgrim's Progress, William Blake, Daniel Defoe, founded the Quakers, the list goes on, all are here but one amongst many is Daniel Defoe, the author of *Robinson Crusoe*. In 1722, he wrote *A Journal of the Plague Year* and this is all about the many sights I have visited on this walk. In fact, before we only 5 years old when the year was writing about — 1665 — occurred and thus his work is largely taken from the diary of his uncle (whom he credits often indirectly). Defoe's grave is marked by a small obelisk, pictured below, the enduring symbol of the Plague year as well as the City, although in Bunhill Fields, the inscriptions on many of the stones are now largely undecipherable.


Monuments to the Plague and Our Fire: to Defoe and Pepys

Retracing our steps to the City, we work around and through the Barbican and reach London Wall which is the line of the wall that Roman first drew in sand through which the medieval gates — Ludgate, Newgate, Aldersgate, Cripplegate, Moorgate, Bishopsgate, and Aldgate — mark the northern limits to our walk. Just before we come full circle back to our starting point at Gresham Street and Cheapside, at St. Paul's, we pass the Museum of London about to move west to Smithfield market and be replaced by London's new international concert hall. Whether or not these plans will ever come to fruition is now in the realms of speculation. We clearly stand at a threshold in the history of the city and perhaps the most public health emergency and economic crisis for the last 400 years takes hold. In this journal, I have not said anything about the London Blitz in the early war years of 1940-41. But the current pandemic is being compared to those years although the enemy is invisible and quite, quite different. Doubtless the City will survive but for the moment, it remains quiet, reflecting the silence of an event of historic proportions.

Lockdown · London · Pandemic · Cities · Covid-19 Crisis

Written by
Michael Batty
Chairman, CASA (Centre for Advanced Spatial Analysis) & Bartlett Professor of Planning at UCL (University College London)

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