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East of Bank

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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 at my son's cottage in Bath and I was nervous about taking the train, having walked to work in Bloomsbury since early March when it seemed to me that the Coronavirus was about to turn into a pandemic. Part of the reason my aging diesel car was out of town, was due to the Mayor of London's recently imposed low emissions zone on central London, coincident with the congestion charge zone which was established back in 2003. To drive anywhere, in or out, the combined charges if you have an old car are well over £25 pounds a day and even before the Pandemic is showing signs of ending, the Mayor has increased these charges. 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 or so people live here in contrast to the half million who commute in each day from all over London to work. The area is empty in the late evenings and at weekends. You have the place all to yourself, a massive infrastructure for a financial sector that is now working largely from home. The place is dominated by wonderful buildings, both ancient and modern back to Roman times, with a recent spate of quite high quality skyscraper building that has dominated its continuing redevelopment since the last financial crisis. During the Lockdown, it has been empty 24/7 and my day is now highly routinised. Apart from a succession of 'Zoom' and 'Teams' meetings, each evening when it is almost dark, I go for a one hour walk. West of Bank I know the area quite well but east is 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 nearly 2000 years ago in 43AD and until the commercial heart began to move west in the late 18th century, this was the place that saw all the action. The King in those far off days ruled from Westminster, originally a separate town, a little over 2 miles west of Bank where the rulers had established their presence from Norman times. 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 this core of the City, now the heart of the financial district. At 8pm each evening for the last 6 weeks I have left my flat and walked to Bank either along Cheapside or Gresham Street. In the weeks I have been doing this, the nights have got lighter and the weather has been dry. The most immediate impression is how few people I encounter each night. It is fair to say that I see more buses than people, and the buses are invariably all empty apart from the occasional 'essential' worker travelling to or from work. It is remarkable that Transport for London are keeping this skeleton service going with virtually no passengers but the government have just bailed them out to the tune of £1.6 billion, but with conditions about raising fares: the first signs of an inflation that is now certain to rock the world's economies once the lockdown ends, is appearing. 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 while it lasts, it is easy enough to walk through an empty city and social distance from the occasional joggers but when the lockdown begins 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, neat and clean and ordered,. They are still tended to by the City Corporation whose continued maintenance of the pocket parks is admirable, looking better than they have ever looked before. With no people and hardly any pollution, everything appears closer and crisper than in normal times when the streets are dense and busy. Perhaps the dry 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 along as though it owned 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 opposite side of the street. Of course, this is the area where some 350 years ago, the last wave of the Great Plague hit London, and there is an eerie resemblance to those years when one reflects. Back then the minister Thomas Vincent in his book *God's Terrible Voice In The City* wrote that he observed "a deep silence almost in every place, especially within the walls; no rattling Coaches, no prancing Horses, no calling in Customers, nor offering Wares". The City was dead in more ways than one, King Charles II and his entourage retreated first to Hampton Court in the country, thence with Parliament to Oxford, and eventually to Salisbury, and Isaac Newton left Cambridge for his family home 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 those days was surrounded by plague pits dug just outside the walls as the virus took hold, only to be followed by the Great Fire a year later in 1666. The Plague killed more than 100,000 people in London which then was a city of some 350,000 and the Fire the year after destroyed two-thirds of the buildings in the City. No wonder one of the tallest until quite recently, an obelisk named simply 'Monument', pictured below, was raised in memory of those awful years. It is still standing, remaining only second in height to St. Paul's until well into the 20th century. In Britain, the current Coronavirus has killed some 35,000 so far (by May 15th 2020), a fraction of the population compared to past plagues but the same eternal mechanisms to deal with it — self-isolation and social distancing — are being employed once again. At least, the stigma of having the disease is no longer marked out with a red cross on the buildings where such unfortunates resided.

But back to Bank. This location is probably the true heart of the City, even of London itself although there is competition between this place and St. Paul's Cathedral which is a stone's throw up Cheapside. Here the post roads converge which mark the present day system of major trunk roads — the familiar 'A' roads, descending in radial fashion to Bank and St. Pauls which mark the historic core of communications and finance in the City, and 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 back of the Bank, Lothbury turns into Throgmorton Street, a pedestrianised street built mainly of Victorian, perhaps some Georgian buildings but who knows because everything gets rebuilt over and over again. This street takes you to Old Broad Street eventually heading north across London Wall into Liverpool Street. Any of the streets going northeast or east, Threadneedle Street on which the Bank actually sits, Cornhill or Lombard Street take you to the heart of the financial district. After five minutes walk you reach Bishopsgate which hurtles down from the north and marks the divide between the new really tall buildings and the older cluster of exchange buildings around the Bank itself. All the new buildings have nicknames such as the Cheese Grater, the Gherkin, the Can of Ham, the Scalpel, the Walkie Talkie, although the biggest tower which is just about finished is the one that first hits you at 22 Bishopsgate. All the buildings in this cluster including older towers such as the Lloyds Building and Tower 42 (The NatWest Tower) are within a stone's throw of each other and if you walk past 22 Bishopsgate along Leadenhall street which is a continuation of Cornhill, you get to the Cheese Grater and Lloyds. Left you reach the Gherkin and the Can of Ham and right the Walkie Talkie.

Skyscraper Alley: The WalkieTalkie, The Scalpel, Lloyds, The Cheese Grater, The Gherkin

Within this enclave, you encounter an amazing number of old churches, often with only the tower left standing, some new after the Fire in 1666 but many going back to medieval times. Well-known personalities lived and died in this area such as Robert Hooke (of Hooke's Law) who was buried in the 13th century St. Helen's Bishopsgate, which has almost as many artefacts and relics as Westminster Abbey to which it is often compared although it is tiny. This was reportedly Shakespeare's church and it survived both the Fire and the London Blitz although it was badly damaged in the early 1990s when the Irish Republican Army bombed the nearby Baltic Exchange on whose site the Gherkin was then constructed. The area is now adorned by one of Nancy Rubin's sculptures from her Diversifolia collection. Called *Crocodylius Philodendrus,* it is a mish-mash of metal objects resembling the great diversity of nature and whether or not it is fitting for this part of the City, I leave you to judge, although the juxtaposition with Hooke's final resting place is not without its associations with science and nature. If you now turn right and walk south across Leadenhall Street, past the Cheese Grater, the Lloyds Building, the Scalpel, and the Willis Tower, in little more than 5 minutes you get to Fenchurch Street where one of the most famous residents of the City, Samuel Pepys, the diarist, lived.

During the Plague, he was one of the few who stayed in the City and on one of my walks I discovered Pepys Street, close to Fenchurch Street Station which is another of the streets that eventually winds its way back to Bank. A little more exploration and I found the house he lived in in Seething Lane and around the corner, St. Olave's church where he spent his mornings holding forth close to the Navy Office where he worked. Pepys was not the saint that some imagined he was from the many caricatures that have portrayed him but he was a great friend of the City, eventually being buried in the tiny churchyard which he frequented daily. It was here he wrote about the Plague and the Fire in his Diary, describing a macabre scene in the immediate vicinity in 1665: "The sickness in general thickens round us, and particularly upon our neighbourhood." 365 souls from the Plague year are buried in St. Olave's for the disease took hold very quickly in London which at its height was killing 5000 people a day in September 1665, a lot higher than the Coronavirus here in England today but at much the same rate. By the time of the Fire, it had largely passed but its impact was much greater. London was essentially cut off from the rest of the country, even the Scottish border was closed. In the following year, Pepys had other matters to attend to besides protecting himself from the Plague. He saved his church from the Fire organising the demolition of the empty houses around it to create fire breaks.

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 a little to the east is the Tower of London and the Royal Mint and back up north of the high towers, there is Liverpool Street, the only mainline station in the City which serves the north and east of the country. Carry on east and within five minutes, you reach Aldgate which is a hard boundary to the financial quarter. Here the buildings quickly become less spectacular, a little more seedy, shades of graffiti are apparent, and the East End begins. If you ply your way to Liverpool Street along the rather edgy Middlesex Street, you can sense the City moving north with many new high buildings in and around the station such as the Broadgate centre. It is here that you can see the hard edge softening although this is not quite the right word for the City is encroaching on old but increasingly renovated Victorian buildings that once dominated industrial London up to the beginning of the second world war. It is here that you also see the influence of globalisation in a myriad of ways. The Universities of Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Northumbria and Coventry have set up their London presence in this area, and as I walk 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, I begin to walk east back home, first to Finsbury Circus and its Square and then east to the Barbican, the monolithic concrete development that now serves as one of the cultural foci of London. If you walk a little 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 so 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 fame as a statistician knows no 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, George Fox who 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, Defoe was only 5 years old when the year he was writing about — 1665 — occurred and thus his work is largely taken from the diary of his uncle (whom he credits albeit indirectly). Defoe's grave is marked by a small obelisk, pictured below, the enduring symbol of the Plague year as well as the Fire, although in Bunhill Fields, the inscriptions on many of the stones are now largely undecipherable.

Retracing our steps to the City, we walk around and through the Barbican and reach London Wall which is the line of the wall the Romans 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 as probably the worst 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.

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

Samuel Pepys echoed this silence when he said " … little noise heard day or night but tolling of bells …' The bells still toll but whether we will see a City so empty ever again will be reflected in the challenges we need to rise to in the post-pandemic future. The last words however must come from

Daniel Defoe in his *Journal* of that fateful year. Writing more than 50 years after the Plague had subsided, he said: “The face of London was now indeed strangely altered”. We have yet to see whether this will be the case in terms of our present ‘plague’ but whatever the future, things will never be the same again.

Lockdown London Pandemic Cities Covid 19 Crisis

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