

A LONDON JOURNEY

It begins, each weekday morning, with a walk through the Estate: 1960s brick-and-concrete, functional, devoid of ornament, and obviously built to a tight budget. But over the years I have lived here, I have grown to appreciate it, even to look on it with fondness. Its low blocks, grouped around grassy squares like the quadrangles of an Oxbridge college, are modest in scale, and when compared with some of the architectural extravaganzas of later, more affluent times, they seem to embody the eighteenth-century virtues of reason and restraint.

So to the shed where I keep my bike, pleased as I reach it to see that once again it has not been broken into. I mount, and ride through the back streets of Bermondsey, lined mostly with former warehouse buildings, now made into expensive dwellings, offices and artists' studios. I pass along the principal street of the quarter, Bermondsey Street, where galleries, coffee shops, restaurants – and estate agents – now occupy the ground floors.

Soon I arrive at Tower Bridge, already at this hour busy with tourists taking photos on their mobile phones. A massive steel and granite structure, preposterously Gothic, it has become an international emblem of London. Built in the 1890s, when the Tay Bridge disaster (1879) was still fresh in memory, it was made several times stronger than it needs to be. Perhaps it will last for 600 years, like Old London Bridge, built by Peter de Colechurch in the late twelfth century and not demolished till 1831. Occasionally Tower Bridge is opened, and I have to wait with all the other traffic; but few tall-masted ships now pass through into the Upper Pool, and those that do are essentially ornamental and bring no merchandise.

Colechurch's bridge has gone, but its legacy survives. The money collected in 1176 to fund its construction has been wisely invested over the centuries, and now is thought to amount to about half a billion pounds. This has paid for the construction and maintenance, not only of two subsequent replacements for London Bridge itself, but of four other Thames crossings – including Tower Bridge.

I go over, and on along Bridge Approach, with the story-book Tower of London to my left and, to my right, a sad, half-hearted imitation from the 1970s of Telford's famous brick warehouses on the western side of St Katharine's Dock. At the junction with East Smithfield I am invariably halted by the traffic lights. I look across to the fortress-like entrance of the former Royal Mint. This is where the sixpences and half-crowns of my youth were made, but no money has been coined here since 1968, the premises being too small to cope with the comprehensive recall and reissue which decimalisation made necessary. Luxurious offices and dwellings now occupy the site.

A right turn takes me into the Tower Hill cyclepath, where an impressively massive chunk of masonry – a surviving section of the medieval wall – heralds my entry into the City of London. This is the area of the ancient merchant city, which has given its name to the whole conurbation. Hardly anything remains of its built fabric, but the street pattern has survived: the names remain, but empty of their former significance. No milk is sold in Milk Street, no friars haunt the Minories, and not much seething takes place in Seething Lane. In one way, though, the medieval city is alive and intact. Its ancient constitution, with all its engaging complexities – its Court of Common Council, its Guilds, Wardmotes, Aldermen and annually elected Lord Mayor – still operates in accordance with laws conceived for an age very different from ours. Successive waves of reform, which in all other parts of the country have swept away the relics of history, generally curtailing the

powers and reducing the independence of local authorities, have not touched the City. No national government, however democratically inclined, has dared to impose change. It has always been argued that 'it is working well as it is'.

The City collects rates and council tax like any other Local Authority, but it also has an enormous fund of inherited wealth. Some of the consequences of this reveal themselves as my ride continues.

A sharp right turn now brings me face-to-face with the building that dominates Tower Hill: not the Tower, but the former headquarters of the Port of London Authority, opened in 1922, and solidly built in grey stone. This is surely the most pompous building in London, with its massive bulk, quite out of scale with its surroundings, its giant Corinthian columns and over-life-size statuary in every available niche. A substantial chunk of the Portland peninsula must have gone into making it. At its apex is a blunt tower whose only function can have been to inspire awe.

It is hard to like the P.L.A. building, but I suppose it must have impressed the masters of foreign vessels lying in the Pool below, calling here to pay their port dues, with the might and majesty of the British Empire at its height. When it was built, London was easily the largest port in the world by tonnage and value of cargo. All that has now gone: the P.L.A. still rules the river, but its scale is much reduced, and the centre of activity is the container port at Tilbury, far downstream. The building, empty of its former significance, is now (I believe) a hotel and member's club.

I proceed, with this behemoth to my right and, to my left, the altogether more cheering sight of guests taking their breakfast in the glass-fronted dining room of the Apex hotel. This little corner of London is closely associated with Samuel Pepys, whose incomparable Diary gives us such a revealing window into seventeenth-century London life. Here, at the corner of Hart Street, is his parish church, St Olave's – 'our church' as he calls it in the Diary – its door opening straight on to the pavement, almost next door to a pub (*The Ship*). St Olave's is one of the few ancient buildings in the City, having survived the Great Fire of 1666. Pepys is buried in the nave alongside his wife Elizabeth. Strange to think that the Navy Office, where he lived and worked – the scene of marital quarrels and reconciliations, of the ill-fated amour with his wife's maid (Deborah Willetts), and of the rooftop where, in the quiet of the evening, he played solos on the flageolet to entertain his neighbours – was situated exactly where the former P.L.A. building now stands.

Round the corner and Fenchurch Street Station with its pretty canopy comes into view, the effect of a quiet country-town terminus rather spoiled by the bronze-faced office block that has been plonked on top of it. The daily tribute of Essex – men, maidens and matrons – pours forth from it. Picking my way carefully between them as they walk on to their jobs in the City, I reach the platforms, and in a very few moments man and bike are speeding eastwards. The line passes at roof level – for it is on a viaduct – through the old East End, now almost totally rebuilt. Bombing, slum clearance, and comprehensive post-war redevelopment have created this townscape, mostly consisting of new housing of variable architectural quality, with just a few islands left of the stock-brick terraces so familiar from old photos of East-End life. The journey presents an instructive survey of the varying fashions in working-class housing design from the 1960s onward: the low, rather faceless, balcony-access blocks of the post-war period, a few towers, some later buildings in the new 'brick-block' style now so much in fashion. To my mind, much the most attractive districts are those created in the now derided post-modern manner, which have a human scale, and often achieve a pleasing variety within a basic unity of style.

The train stops briefly at Limehouse station; then, a little further on to the left, a scene from a medieval romance: Tower Hamlets Cemetery – or forest, rather – with its shadowy paths and little clearings, lit up by shafts of sunlight on fine days, and its mighty trees coming right up to the railway, so that you seem to be flying through the canopy as you gaze into its dark, mysterious depths.

We cross the River Lee and enter what was once Danish territory: flat, open, scrubby land on both sides. This was where London's offensive industries were situated, chemical works, bone-boilers, distilleries, glue makers and gas works, essential to the city's support but rarely seen or thought about by most inhabitants. Over on the left, the Channelsea River where the broken remains of Phillip Hardwick's famous propylaeum – the so-called 'Euston Arch' – were secretly dumped after its 1962 demolition, an extraordinary act of official vandalism that would probably not be repeated today (or would it? See my essay *A Doomed Estate*).

Alighting at West Ham, I descend from platform level in the tiny lift. Sometimes I have to share it with other passengers who have baby-buggies or large luggage. The space is so intimate that conversation is almost unavoidable, so this is my opportunity to catch up on what the East End is currently thinking. Leaving the station, I ride on under the railway and then under Bazalgette's Northern Outfall Sewer, trying not to think too closely of what is passing above my head through its five huge steel pipes on its way to Beckton. Like Tower Bridge, this is a piece of Victorian infrastructure that was built to last. It is still in perfect order and working as well as ever, despite the huge increase in demand caused by a rising population.

I ride on up the northern part of Manor Road. This wide four-lane highway, driven through a district of small houses and separated from them by high brick walls, was evidently created to facilitate access to the docks – docks which are now empty of shipping. I am harassed by cars and lorries which, no doubt relishing the unusual absence of congestion, are tempted into excessive speed as they pass.

With some relief I reach West Ham parish church, the architectural highlight of my daily trip. This lovely building, surrounded by a large walled churchyard and shaded by massive plane trees, is a survivor from an age when all around was fields. It incorporates a mixture of different period styles and materials. Parts date from the twelfth century, but the oldest visible element, the castellated stone tower at the west end with its octagonal stair-turret, was built in the 1400s. The stone nave has been modified with later dormer windows; the brick North-East Chapel is clearly Tudor; the brick facing on the south side is early nineteenth century; the covered walkway in Renaissance style leading to the south porch is apparently eighteenth-century, renewed in the nineteenth; and the pale-brick meeting room is most definitely from our own era. But nothing jars; all is in scale and in harmony. It is impossible not to love this church, and I feel inspired every time I pass it, noting with amusement as I go the single gravestone that stands in the pathway just *outside* the churchyard wall, leaning over as if trying to escape.

My journey now lies through West Ham Park, where a notice proclaims 'We welcome responsible cycling'. Green on every side as far as the eye can see, with massive trees, limes, oaks, horse-chestnuts and planes, and birdsong that seems to follow me as I pass through. A smooth path, and no traffic to harass me. What unalloyed pleasure for a cyclist! Trying my best to be 'responsible', I give way to dog walkers (and free-running dogs), buggies (and toddlers), walkers and joggers – some of whom are running in Islamic dress, with *hijab* (headscarf) and *abaya* (long black cloak).

This huge and beautiful green space – nearly 80 acres – is owned and managed by the City of London, though it is hard to believe that the bankers and brokers of the City often – or ever – set foot in it. It is one of a number of open spaces – Hampstead Heath and Epping Forest are others – that the City maintains from its own resources, at no direct cost to the residents round about. This method of paying for assets of public benefit by endowment was normal in the Middle Ages, when the alternative – painfully extracting the necessary funds from the people by means of taxation – was fraught with difficulties. It has proved to be remarkably durable. As well as those supported by the City of London, many other public assets are still financed in this way, at least in part: among them are educational institutions such as Oxford and Cambridge Colleges, most of the lighthouses and buoys around our coasts, many hospitals, and the Church of England itself, with its tremendous heritage of beautiful buildings (including West Ham church).

There is an element of illusion in the idea that the public gets these benefits totally free of charge. Pepys had to bury his treasure in the garden when, temporarily, he had to leave London to escape the plague; but inherited wealth nowadays usually has no tangible form. It is essentially a fiction – a deed giving rights over land, a share certificate, a figure in the electronic memory of a bank, all have no *intrinsic* value. The motive force that pays the wages of the park-keepers of West Ham actually comes, day by day, from the contemporary public: for example, whenever they pay the interest on a debt owed, directly or indirectly, to a City institution, or pay rent on a property owned by the Bridge House Estates Fund, a tiny proportion of that payment goes towards cutting the grass at West Ham, or keeping London Bridge in good condition.

Of course, the many needs of a great modern city like London far exceed what could be paid for by means of endowments, so it is fortunate that we now have a highly efficient system of tax collection. Taxation has the advantage of scale; it also allows for political control over the way that the money is spent. Endowment, however, has the advantage that it inspires gratitude rather than resentment. Could its role be expanded? Where an asset is uncontroversial, such as a park or bridge, the lack of democratic control perhaps does not matter too much, but where there are choices to be made which may benefit some and hurt others, where there is a difference of opinion not only about *means* but about *ends*, then democracy is probably unavoidable, despite the difficulties and delays that it creates.

I am now seven miles from the City of London, but evidently still, in my thoughts, affected by its influence. When T. S. Eliot, in *The Waste Land*, called it an ‘unreal city’, he perhaps had in mind the almost complete absence of any domestic life there: no hanging out of washing, no children playing hop-scotch on the pavements, no trips to the fish shop to collect Friday night’s supper. Even in his day the City was dominated by finance, and he was himself working as a banker; but pockets of manufacturing and warehousing still existed, such as the tea wholesaler for whom I worked briefly in the 1960s, and the great national newspapers whose printing and distribution dominated the area around Fleet Street.

Since I first began to live in London, all that has gone. Apart from the legal quarter, the historic churches, and a small residential district around the Barbican, the City now consists almost entirely of financial firms – accompanied, of course, by the huge contingent of coffee shops, pubs and cafés that are needed to sustain their workers. Banks and financial institutions were originally based in London because of the need to service trade: trade in physical goods, that for centuries came to the heart of the city in ships. A broker trading in timber, coffee, furs or ivory could take a short

walk to the docks and quays and see the actual cargoes being unloaded. Now the traders in the City's air-conditioned dealing rooms concern themselves increasingly with abstractions and derivatives. All the activities connected with handling, processing and distributing actual goods – the mundane materials of everyday life – have gone elsewhere. The same is true, to some extent, of London as a whole.

As well as reducing the vitality and variety of London, I confess that this makes me uneasy about the future of the city I love. It is as if the living creature has crept away, leaving only its shell. Can it survive on abstractions alone? Will it still be, what London has always been, a city on a human scale? Will some future bubble burst and once and for all bring down the whole structure, now that nothing tangible is left to support it?

I leave the park through the elaborate gates on the north side. Now I am in Forest Gate, a Victorian suburb with more substantial terraces and semi-detached villas. Perhaps a third of its inhabitants today are of South-Asian heritage and Islamic belief. The final landmark of my trip comes into view: the tall tower of the former Congregational church, made of red brick and knapped flint, with a short spire flanked by smaller spires over each of four buttresses. It is now an Islamic girls school and mosque. Here at any rate is a structure from the past that has been revitalised by finding a new use.

And so swiftly on along Romford Road to my workshop in Sprowston Mews. I unlock, and the day's work begins.