



London: A History

Jeremy Black

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Everyone thinks they know London. Its landmarks have been used in a hundred films; its skyline is instantly recognisable; and the winding course of its river familiar, in great detail, from the satellite imagery used to begin the BBC's *Eastenders*. For London is at the centre of the nation's attention, and has been, on and off, for two thousand years.

Yet familiarity does not necessarily bring enlightenment. The very size of the city has the power to obscure as well as to mesmerise; the unparalleled tangle of experience over such a long period of time becomes impossible to unravel, at least in one telling or from one perspective.

What, then, was London? The answer depends on who you ask, and when. London was a capital city, a port, an economic powerhouse, a magnet for talent. Two hundred and fifty years ago London was the first modern city, with the world's highest wages and best standard of living, at least for those in settled employment.

Yet it could just as easily be portrayed (and often was) as a sink of depravity, a slum of despair with some of the worst death rates in the world, in which urban expansion and population explosion outstripped the city's capacity to provide even the basic means of life to ordinary citizens. Was London, as the radical pamphleteer and champion of the virtues of rural England William Cobbett said disparagingly in the 1820s, the 'Great Wen' – a pathological swelling on the face of the nation? To those from the furthest corners of the land it could appear from afar to be a seething snakepit of avarice, prostitution, corruption and vice ... yet one that could be seductively attractive, full of opportunity for fortune or salvation.

To political commentators, or scheming courtiers, London was the heart of the nation state and of empire; to economists and financiers it was where you had to be to do real business; to lawyers there was nowhere else like it; to lightermen, sailors and watermen who worked the river or sailed the world it was their home port, the city on the most important artery of world trade; to socialites it was the tiny, febrile centre of their universe; to social reformers it was, and seems destined always to be, the den of iniquity, inequality, inequity.

London was wealthy, populous, central to the nation, cosmopolitan yet self-absorbed and inward-looking. When young, enterprising provincials made their way to London – as they did in their thousands – they knew that they would find everything they needed there – financial institutions, the law and all its multifarious (or nefarious) practitioners, a huge potential market, contacts, networks, the court – all in one place – along with coffee-houses, fine restaurants and gentlemen's clubs, salacious entertainments, fashionable assemblies and a cult of celebrity.

People did get spat out of the vortex. Many who migrated to London became disillusioned, and some went home again. Some who made fortunes chose to retire to a quieter, landed seclusion, but many more, not just in the East End, would have left if only they been able to. But they couldn't. They came; they saw; and they were conquered. The filth, the squalor, the misery and the poverty: these were as much the real London as the elegant squares of Belgravia and the fine villas of Kensington. The stews of Southwark, the opium dens of Limehouse, the child prostitution of Stepney ... a walk and a world away from the heaths of Hampstead and the shops of Regent Street.

In fact, of course, we cannot really talk of one London at all. Properly speaking, the City – the ancient walled city rather than the financiers' Square Mile of today – is the true London, with its City wards, beadle, sheriffs and lord mayor (with his official home at Mansion House), ancient Guildhall, Customs House, city walls and royal castle. But when we think of London now, we casually and understandably include much else besides, including the separate City of Westminster and the no less ancient 'Borough' of Southwark.

What we have, then, is a complex, bedevilling place whose history has been enacted upon so many different fields of play that it is hard to encompass in a single survey.

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