

Reimagining Tudor London

by Mathew Lyons

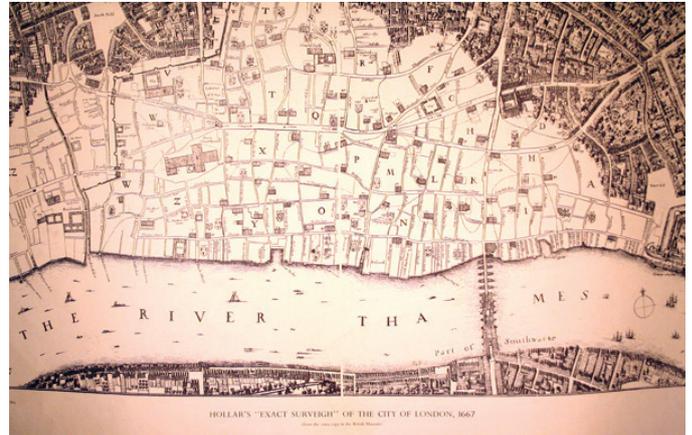
I have lived in London most of my life, and one of the pleasures for me in researching and writing *The Favourite*, an exploration of the relationship between Elizabeth I and Walter Raleigh, is that so much of their story is also a London story. Or, more accurately, London is always there in the background, discreetly attracting my attention with its prodigies. I am forever tempted to go in search of it.

Of course, Raleigh's London no longer exists, precious little of it having survived the Great Fire of 1666, although the Victorians also contributed along the way, destroying Raleigh's Islington home, for instance.

But the extent of the fire's devastation is still unsettling; eyewitness descriptions are reminiscent for the modern reader of footage of Hiroshima or Dresden. In the aftermath of the fire there was 'nothing but stones and rubbish... from one end of the City almost to the other' wrote one Lincoln's Inn lawyer, while a man from the bleak lunar hills of Westmoreland found himself gazing upon a ruined reflection of his home: 'The houses are laid so flat to the ground that the City looks just like our fells, for there is nothing to be seen but heaps of stones.'

Despite having read such comments many times before, I was nevertheless stunned to sit in the library and look for the first time at Wenceslaus Hollar's 'before and after' maps of London. Those of the City before the fire, in common with the maps and drawings of his predecessors like Visscher and Agas, are profligate with detail: they provide not merely a street plan but also a bird's-eye view of the city from some notional perspective in the air.

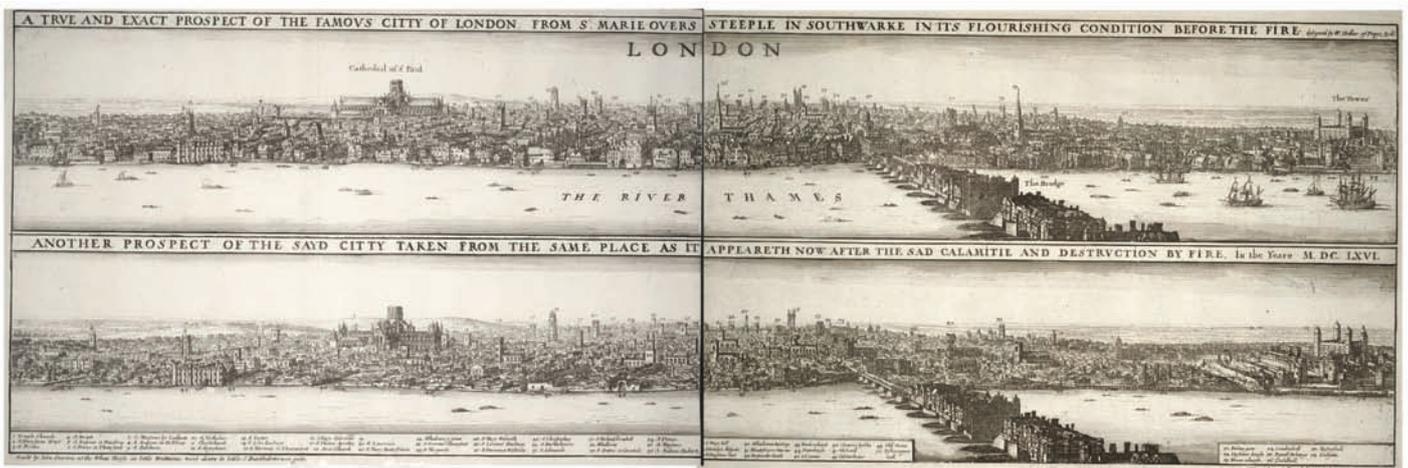
Along each street you can see something of each house, even if often it is only the pitch of the gabled roof or the number of floors,



Wenceslaus Hollar's map starkly outlines the Fire-damaged districts

windows flecked with ink; behind the houses are a patchwork of courtyards, paths and gardens studded with trees. It is impossible to know to what extent these kind of details are intended as accurate representations, as opposed to the merely illustrative or emblematic, but they are nonetheless vivid testimony to the profusion of buildings in Tudor and Stuart London, and to life lived, in a lovely Elizabethan word sadly fallen from the language, 'pestered' close together – meaning overcrowded, clogged, pressed against one another. That 'pestered' also seems to imply of pestilence and plague – despite being in fact derived from a different word-root – adding a poignant undertow to the image of these packed and compact lives.

On Hollar's 'Exact Surveigh' of 1667, however, commissioned by Charles II, things are different. The area skirting the fire damage is, as before, cramped with detail. But the great heart of the map is mostly blank – shockingly so. Hollar gives us the skeletal streets through the City and the sites of the churches and a few other buildings; elsewhere, white space. At first sight, Hollar's print



Wenceslaus Hollar's before and after engraving of the city viewed from the south of the river

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Reimagining Tudor London (cont.)



inverts the implied convention that the centre of any map should be the point of most interest and complexity, with both fading the further you get towards the margins. This map focuses the eye on emptiness, the absence of information. The City, and its history, had been erased. It must have been the simplest and saddest map Hollar ever drew.

How then can we try to re-establish – in our minds if nowhere else – this lost world? The empty centre of Hollar’s print is, perhaps, no bad place to start.

In *Invisible Cities*, Italo Calvino offers us a fictive re-imagining of Venice at its apogee: voluptuous, rich, infinitely full of possibility. In keeping with that spirit, I am tempted to say that Elizabeth’s London hasn’t been destroyed; it is simply no longer visible. The evidence is, quite literally, under your feet as you walk.

Any A-Z can guide you through this other London because its streets are so much our own. I have an A-Z open beside me as I write this. Just scanning it randomly now I can see Cheapside and Lothbury; Crutched Friars and Custom House; the Minories; Poultry; Bishopsgate and Aldgate; Leadenhall and Laurence Pountney; Milk Street, Bread Street and Honey Lane; and many more beside. The tenacity of these names and the histories they embody is remarkable.

As mere words such names should be ephemeral and transitory; yet they have proved more enduring and resilient than the buildings and sites they once described. A few yards east of the Millennium Bridge, for example, is a small inconsequential street named Broken Wharf. The watergate that it describes was already ‘broken and fallen down into the Thames’ in the 1590s; it is entirely possible that it had been so since at least 1209, given that its then owners, the Abbots of Chertsey and the Abbots of Hamme, were described as having argued about its repair for 40 years in 1249. There is no record of it ever having been mended. That we should still be commemorating an insignificant quayside that may not have functioned properly for 800 years seems, on the face of it, unreasonable, if not ludicrous, but also somehow wonderful too.

The kind of stubborn resistance to change – even as everything is in fact always changing – that such street names exemplify undoubtedly brings the old city closer to our reach. These, and dozens more like them, are the streets that Raleigh knew; paradoxically, I wonder if the lack of widespread architectural remains doesn’t make it easier for us to see the City as it was.

When we look at buildings of this period – or any other for that matter – it is very difficult to see them clearly. Our sense of them has been warped by the passage of time – not merely by alterations, additions, and improvements, but also by the simple fact of their age. We cannot see them new; and it is hard to envisage them at

a point in time at which architectural styles that seem antiquated to us – because they are – were the height of modernity, and when the buildings themselves were functional, living things, not artefacts from a notional heritage.

But what has resisted change most of all is, of course, the Thames. So much so that for most of its length we almost deny its presence.

The modern heart of the city runs, roughly speaking, on an east-west axis from Liverpool Street to Marble Arch. It’s not much of a heart; and there’s not much to quicken the visitor’s pulse either; London’s greatness mostly lies elsewhere. Here by the water, though, it is different. On the river front, the city has its arms spread wide in welcome. It is the city’s old true heart. For the Elizabethans, the Thames was the city’s main thoroughfare, the quickest and surest way from the court at Whitehall to the City and on down to Greenwich, the ‘sure and most beautiful roade for shipping’ in the words of the antiquarian William Camden.

That was a boast, of course, although Camden was not usually extravagant in his praise, but everybody used it. ‘A man would say, that seeth the shipping there,’ continued Camden, ‘that it is, as it were, a very wood of trees disbranched to make glades and let in light; so shaded it is with masts and sailes.’ It would be a mistake to think of the river’s traffic as wholly dominated by the big trading ships; most craft on the water were small. There were some 2,000 small boats on the river, supporting 8,000 active water men.

As it happens I worked for a while not long ago on Bankside. I used to live near the river, some way upstream, but it had been some time since I had been beside it every day. London is a different city by the river. It’s not the sense of space or the sudden gift of a horizon – something much of central London deprives you of – or the brisk smack of the wind punching its way upriver from the Estuary, or



Our forebears were much used to viewing the river at this level

Reimagining Tudor London (cont.)

even the smell of the water, mostly clean, carried on the still salt sea air. It's this: even with its medieval walls long dismantled, the old northern half of the city still has its back turned to the rest of England: only here is it open, arms outstretched. But it seems to have forgotten what its arms are open for.

I realised that as a Londoner I had always thought of London as a city beside the river. But the truth is that London is now a city above it. The Victorian embankment completed the process, but since Wren's plans for London after the Great Fire, the city had been looking for ways to lift itself off the soft muddy banks, to tame the river as it bends and stretches west of London Bridge, enclose and contain it. As a city we do all we can to stop people going down to the water's edge.

Perhaps it seems a trivial point, but from a vantage point of 30 feet or so above the waterline, the Thames presents a wonderful prospect; down by the water it is a visceral pleasure, and more than a pleasure, too: the Thames is a large body of water, after all, and it has a quiet, insistent power – menace, even – as all great tidal waters do.

As I said earlier, I have lived in London almost all my life, but it was only relatively recently that I came across for the first time a set of steps down to the northern foreshore; most access is chained off or inhibited with warnings and threats. I was walking down from Bank station. I passed Bucklersbury on my right, where in Raleigh's time apothecaries sold medicines, herbs and perfumes - Falstaff speaks disparagingly of the place in *Merry Wives* – then on down Walbrook, which marks the eastern bank of a stream already built over by then, and further down the rake of Dowgate Hill where the brilliant light of the sun on the water first catches your eye, and then across Upper Thames Street and into Cousin Lane.

Arbitrary as this journey was, it was a route you could have taken five hundred years ago and still arrived at the same place, the river, since at the end of Cousin Lane there are a rare set of steps down to the water's edge.

It's hard to convey the sense of excitement I felt nervously climbing down the wet stone stairs and out for the first time onto the river's shore in the heart of the old City, never mind the red-brick rubble and worse underfoot. I had never really understood Spenser's 'silver streaming Thames' before – from above it's always mostly looked greyish-brown to me – but down at its own level the sunlight made the whole body of the water glow. The modern city, behind and

above me fell away and the old sense of the river as the first best road seemed to roar back to life.

I hadn't thought to look for it, but one of the many crises in Elizabeth's reign snapped into focus: not far to my right, just the other side of Southwark Bridge, was Queenhithe, so named because it was a gift from King John to his mother Eleanor of Aquitaine, and in shape at least still recognisable for what it was, one of London's principal wharves upstream from the Tower. When Raleigh's enemy, the Earl of Essex, failed in his bid to raise the City in his rebellion on Sunday 8 February 1601, it was from Queenhithe he took a boat back upriver to Essex House, by the Temple, a mere 500 yards or so, with trial and execution his certain fate. The triviality of the distance made brutally clear the finality with which the City and its streets were closed against him.

It is foolish of course to suggest we can ever know much of the lost City, but there are more glimpses of it to be had than we might suppose – and all the more tantalising for being half-caught. If the city that Raleigh and Elizabeth does exist only in the imagination, the imagination is tethered at every turn to tangible realities at our feet, and our river itself is the greatest of those realities – and perhaps the one with the greatest capacity to surprise us with its continuities while we persist in treating it is almost as an object to admire from a distance, a museum piece, not as a living entity – or indeed as the very thing the city was built to use.



About Mathew Lyons

Mathew Lyons is the author of the critically acclaimed Impossible Journeys, described by the Guardian as 'a non-fiction companion to the tall tales of Italo Calvino's Marco Polo'. It was the Folio Society's bestselling title through 2010. His latest book is The Favourite, published by Constable & Robinson in March 2011.
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