

Benjamin Franklin in London - Finding His Footsteps

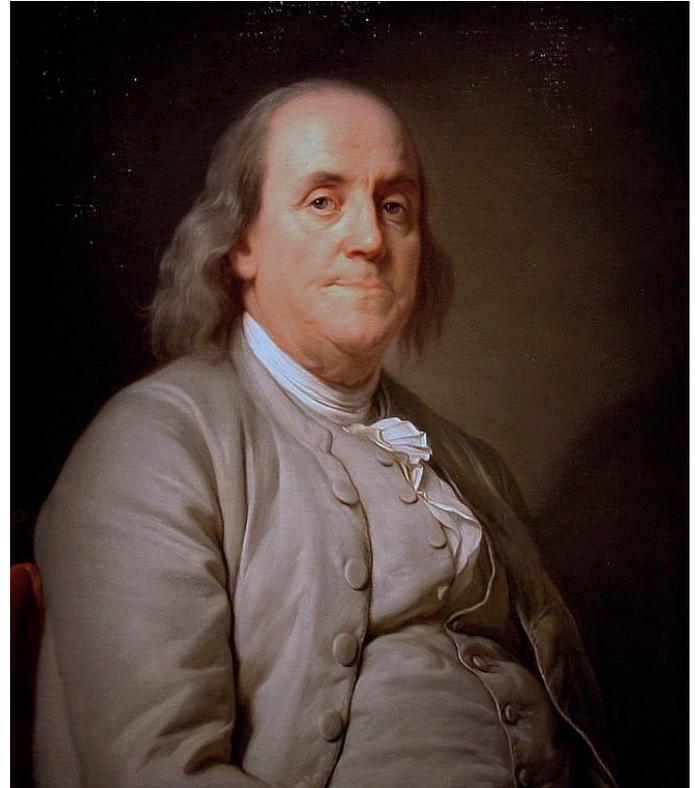
by George Goodwin

Benjamin Franklin (1706 - 1790) first came to London as a young teenage printer from Philadelphia. He arrived on Christmas Eve 1724 with the expectation that, after presenting sealed letters providing both introductions and credit, he would be able to buy a state of the art printing press and return to set up in business with Sir William Keith. This looked to be an extremely advantageous arrangement as Keith was also the Lt Governor of Pennsylvania. However, it soon became obvious that all Keith's promises were worthless and Franklin found himself stranded. This would have been a very serious matter for an unskilled stranger, but Franklin's skill as a compositor gave him something of great value.

Franklin immediately found work at Palmer's, a printing firm housed in the former lady chapel of St Bartholomew the Great. With his friend James Ralph, he took lodgings in Little Britain. The street was close to his work, but it held a greater significance as an important centre of printing and publishing. It was a spiritual home for Franklin. Little Britain was where Samuel Buckley had printed the *Daily Courant*, London's first daily newspaper in 1702 and the inspiration for the *New England Courant*, where Ben Franklin had served his first apprenticeship under the alert editorial eye of his elder brother James. Buckley was also the publisher of an even more important journal: the first version of *The Spectator* — that of Joseph Addison and Captain Richard Steele — and this had an extraordinary influence on the youthful Benjamin Franklin. Young Ben read and re-read the periodical and then, having put it away, he honed his writing skills by rewriting articles in his own words. Franklin was certainly ready to acknowledge his debt to Addison, later describing him as a man 'whose writings have contributed more to the improvement of the minds of the British nation, and polishing their manners, than those of any other English pen whatever'.

Little Britain is now divided into three, with its winding central part — an extension of the busy King Edward Street — crossing the other two. There is no sign here of Addison, or even Buckley, let alone that of young Ben. The street has not only changed completely, but is still changing, with the western part an ongoing building site for Barts Hospital.

The best echo of Ben's first stay in London is not to be found in bricks and mortar, either in Little Britain or in Sardinia Street (then Duke Street) where he moved to save money. Rather it resonates through something he brought from America and sold to one of the leading natural philosophers and collectors of the day. The best reminder of Franklin in 1720s London is not a place but a purse. Writing in his autobiography, Franklin describes how he approached Sir Hans Sloane to sell the purse. He tells us that he wrote to Sloane directly, itself remarkable in an age when letters of introduction played such a part. Yet, in case we feel this to be just the bragging of a brash young man, there is a second piece of evidence through the survival amongst Sir Hans's papers of a letter from Franklin dated 2nd June 1725. It is worth reproducing in full:



Benjamin Franklin (c1785) by Joseph-Siffred Duplessis

Sir

Having lately been in the Northern Parts of America, I have brought from thence a Purse made of the Stone Asbestos, a Piece of the Stone and a Piece of Wood, the Pithy Part of which is of the same Nature, and called by the Inhabitants Salamander Cotton. As you are noted to be a Lover of Curiosities, I have informed you of these; and if you have any Inclination to purchase them, or see them, let me know your Pleasure by a Line directed for me at the Golden Fan in Little Britain, and I will wait upon you with them. I am, Sir, Your most humble Servant.

Benjamin Franklin

P.S. I expect to be out of Town in 2 or 3 Days, and therefore beg an immediate Answer.



continued...

Benjamin Franklin in London (cont).



The nineteen-year-old Franklin's chutzpah has to be admired. After all, he was addressing the eminent man after whom Sloane Street and Sloane Square were named. Particularly entertaining is Franklin's huckster postscript, written by someone who had already been in London for six months and would stay a year longer. We know of the letter, reproduced in the Yale volumes of Franklin's papers, as it was part of the Sloane bequest that formed the initial collection of the British Museum in 1753. The purse has survived too. It is in the Natural History Museum, formerly part of the British Museum, but now its own foundation. The purse can be viewed there encased in Perspex, perhaps unsurprisingly — it is made of asbestos after all.

Franklin's second stay in London was completely different from his first. It was far longer: with just one eighteen-month return to Philadelphia, it lasted from 1757 right up to March 1775. Franklin also arrived as a far more elevated individual: he was a political representative of the Assembly of Pennsylvania and, far more importantly, had himself become a world-famous natural philosopher (scientist) in an age when science held a fascination for Britain's aristocratic elite. The publication of Franklin's *Experiments and Observations on Electricity* had gained him a Fellowship of the Royal Society and, more importantly, the Society's Copley Medal — the 18th century equivalent of the Nobel Prize. His fame had spread right across Europe, with Immanuel Kant describing him as 'the Prometheus of modern times'. In short, he was to be the most celebrated American then living in London.

The second stay was also very different in terms of Franklin's domestic arrangements. Shortly after his arrival, Franklin, his son William and their two slaves lodged with a Mrs Margaret Stevenson in Craven Street, just off the south side of the Strand at its western end. They were the sole lodgers in the house, though to describe Franklin as a lodger would be completely inaccurate. He and Mrs Stevenson were immediately close platonic friends and the house at 7 Craven Street (renumbered as 36 in the 19th century) effectively became Franklin's household with him at its head. There were many other arrivals and departures, with the latter including — at different times — William and the two slaves. However, Franklin remained there himself for the rest of his time in London. For anyone keen to step in Franklin's footsteps during his important London years, then Craven Street offers the best opportunity. For, somewhat remarkably, it has survived. It is the only one of Benjamin Franklin's many different homes, on both sides of the Atlantic, to do so.

It is in the building at Craven Street that William Strahan, Franklin's great friend and Dr Johnson's publisher, enjoyed tea; there that William Pitt the Elder came, in early 1775, to discuss a peace plan to present to Parliament; and there, just a few weeks later, that Joseph Priestley sat with a tearful Franklin, the day before the American was forced to flee the country through the vengeful actions of members of Lord North's cabinet.

At Craven Street, one can imagine following Franklin's progress up its many flights of stairs, if not as quickly, as this energetic man

used them for exercise when it was raining outside. He also had his own set of dumbbells, and thus the 18th century equivalent of his own gym.



The front room of Benjamin Franklin House in Craven Street.

That the Georgian House would survive in any way at all seemed unlikely in 1980, when the building was empty and in a dire state of repair. A trust was formed to prevent its demolition or 'development', but it was not until the late 1990s that a dedicated management group and the support of a vast number of organisations (including the Heritage Lottery Fund, English Heritage, the Getty Foundation and the William Hewlett Trust) began to secure the structure of the building and to repair and restore its fabric. It was a long, painstaking and expensive job, but, in 2006, the Benjamin Franklin House museum and education centre opened in time to celebrate the (New Style) tercentenary of Franklin's birth on 17 January 1706. It has just celebrated its 10th and Franklin's 310th birthday.

There are a number of remaining well-known buildings, whether pubs or palaces, that the famous Franklin frequented in London and they are revisited in the light-hearted twitter tour 'Benjamin Franklin was Here!' on @GeorgeGoodwin1, but it is only at Benjamin Franklin House that you are properly 'in his footsteps'. This is not a house full of red ropes. Its original contents are long gone and, indeed, it is empty of furniture. The life there is presented through the House's Historical Experience, with an actress playing Mrs Stevenson's daughter Polly (for whom Franklin was a father figure), and through AV special effects. For those more interested in the building itself, there is an architectural tour.

About George Goodwin

George Goodwin is the author of Benjamin Franklin in London: The British Life of America's Founding Father (published in hardback and as an e-book by Weidenfeld & Nicolson on 11 February 2016). George is a Member of London Historians. His web site. If you use Twitter you can follow him as @GeorgeGoodwin1.

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