

Viewpoint

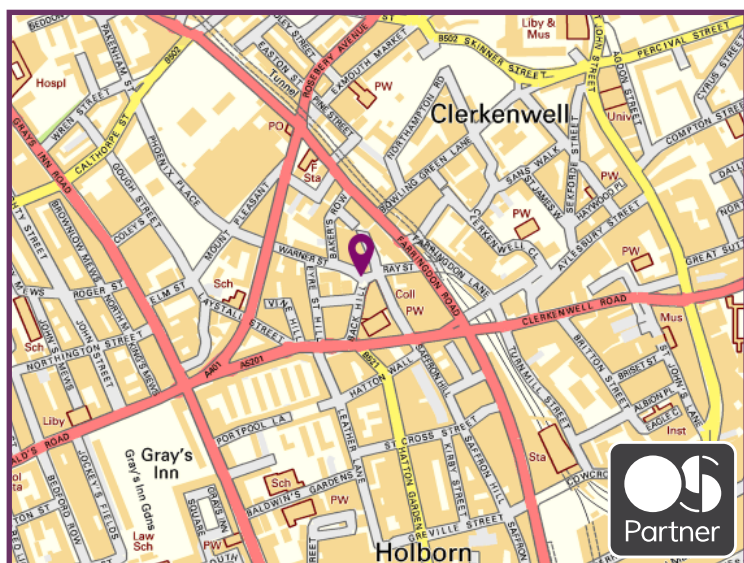
A fleeting glimpse



Time: 15 mins

Region: Greater London

Landscape: urban



Location:

Metal grate outside The Coach and Horses pub, Ray Street, Clerkenwell, London EC1R 3DJ

Grid reference:

TQ 31266 82147

Keep an eye out for:

Street names that point to the area's past, like Pear Tree Court, Bowling Green Lane and White Bear Yard

On an unassuming London street, a metal grate lies in the road. It's walked or driven over probably hundreds of times a day without a second thought to what might be underneath. But it's all too easy to overlook what might be right under our feet.

This is one of the only clues we have of a once mighty river that flowed through the capital. A river with a strong enough current to power watermills. Wide enough for boats to carry cargo through the city.

What does this drain cover tell us about one of London's lost rivers?



Taking care of traffic, bend down and put your ear to the drain cover on the street outside The Coach and Horses pub. Can you hear the sound of water? Peer into the darkness. Can you see a dark stream of water below? Underneath this unassuming drain cover runs the River Fleet, perhaps the mightiest of London's lost rivers.

Now look around and take note of the lie of the land (and some local street names). Notice that you're standing on relatively low ground with Ray Street, Herbal Hill and Back Hill rising up around you. The contours of the streets show us that this was once the valley of the River Fleet.

It's almost impossible to imagine now but until around 160 years ago the Fleet was an open river that ran for four miles from its source at Hampstead Heath to the Thames at Blackfriars Bridge. Sailing boats and barges once plied its waters transporting cargo through London including coal and the stone to build the original St Paul's Cathedral.

The current was strong enough to power water-powered mills. Nearby Turnmill Street is so named for the number of mills that lined the banks of the river in the eighteenth-century. In 1741 a house on Turnmill Street was advertised to let with access to "a good stream and current that will turn a mill to grind hair powder or liquorish"!

However all this heavy industry took its toll and over time the river became increasingly used as a sewer. Butchers working at nearby Smithfield meat market used it as a dumping ground for offcuts of meat and blood.

Waste from the tanneries, human excrement and even the bodies of cats and dogs found their way into the river. In 1710 journalist and author Jonathan Swift wrote; *'Sweepings from butchers' stalls, dung, guts and blood / Drown'd puppies, stinking sprats, all drench'd in mud / Dead cats and turnip tops, come tumbling down the flood.'*

And so the Fleet River became the Fleet Ditch, a putrid and dangerous waterway. Section by section it was covered over. Its upper reaches were concealed by suburban building while the lower reaches were diverted into an underground sewer and the Fleet was lost from sight.

