

Walking on water

A self guided walk from Islington to Blackfriars



Discover how the capital has been shaped by water
See a deep river valley transformed into a major road
Find a sacred well buried deep in the ground
Hear a 'lost' river gushing under your feet

www.discoveringbritain.org

*the stories of our landscapes
discovered through walks*







Contents

Introduction	4
Route map and stopping points	5
Practical information	6
Commentary	8
Further information	33
Credits	34

© The Royal Geographical Society with the Institute of British Geographers, London, 2014

Discovering Britain is a project of the Royal Geographical Society (with IBG)

The digital and print maps used for Discovering Britain are licensed to the RGS-IBG from Ordnance Survey

Cover image: Grate in Ray Street over the Fleet River © Caroline Millar

Walking on water

Trace London's underground water from Islington to Blackfriars

Water is a vital feature of most settlements and London, built on the banks of the River Thames, is no exception. But this is a waterside stroll with a difference...

On this walk from Islington to the Thames at Blackfriars, you will discover how the unseen water under your feet has shaped London, from the natural springs that rose north of the city to the valley of the mighty River Fleet now reduced to a few drops.



Water fountain at Nautilus House
© Rory Walsh



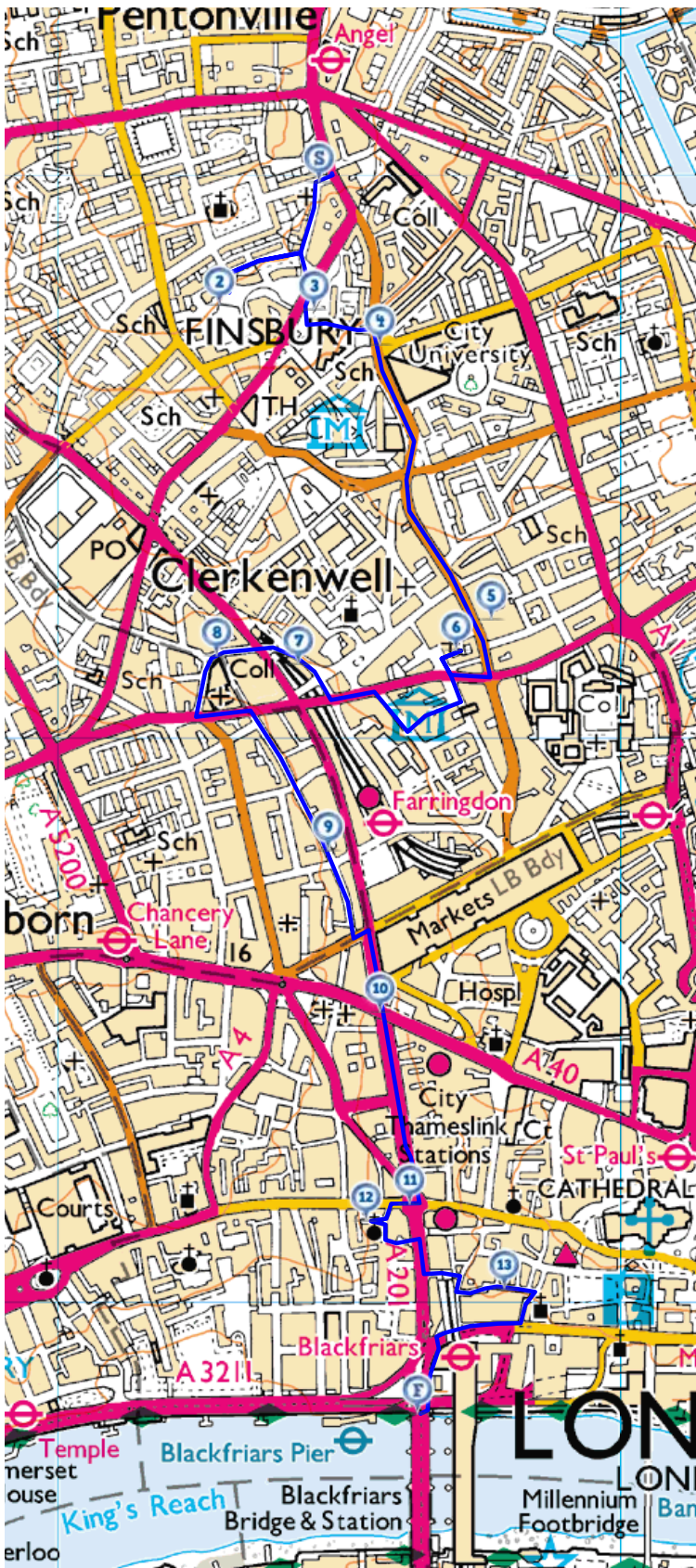
Fishing monks at The Black Friar pub
© Rory Walsh

Discover how the city has been shaped by water. Find evidence of medieval monasteries and Georgian spas. Visit former breweries, holy wells and dangerous dens of vice and criminality brought to life by Charles Dickens.

Learn to recognise how water is still inscribed in the London's landscape today, from street names to tell-tale dips in the road.

Experience familiar streets and neighbourhoods with fresh eyes as you walk on water without getting your feet wet.

Route map



Ordnance Survey
Licensed Partner

Stopping points

- Start.** Junction of St John Street and Chadwell Street
2. Gardens of the Nautilus Building, Myddleton Passage
 3. Wells House, Spa Green Estate
 4. Cattle trough, junction of Wynyatt Street and St John Street
 5. Former Cannon's Brewery, Brewhouse Yard
 6. St John's Priory Courtyard, St John's Square
 7. Well Court, 14-16 Farringdon Lane
 8. Outside The Coach and Horses pub, Ray Street
 9. Junction of Saffron Hill and Greville Street
 10. View of Farringdon Street from Holborn Viaduct
 11. Ludgate Circus
 12. St Bride's churchyard, St Bride's Avenue
 13. St Ann Blackfriars churchyard, Ireland Row
- Finish.** Underneath Blackfriars Bridge

Practical information

Location	Farringdon, Greater London
Start point	Junction of St John Street and Chadwell Street, Islington EC1V 4LD
Finish point	Thames Embankment under Blackfriars Bridge EC4V 4DY
Distance	2 ½ miles
Getting there	<p>Underground - The nearest station is Angel on the Northern Line. From the main exit of the station, turn left into Islington High Street. At the major junction, cross Pentonville Road and continue into St John Street. Chadwell Street is on the right after about a hundred metres, marked by a green sign on a lamppost for the New River Path.</p> <p>Train - The nearest mainline stations are Farringdon and Blackfriars. Direct trains run to both from Kings Cross, City Thameslink, Brighton, Bedford, Sutton, Sevenoaks, Luton and St Albans.</p> <p>Bus - The area is served by many London buses including routes 55, 63, 243.</p> <p>Bicycle - There are plenty of London Cycle Hire docking stations nearby.</p>
Level	Gentle - A simple urban route though there are several sets of steps and some gentle ascents and descents.
Terrain	The walk is on urban pavements and paths.
Conditions	Parts of this walk pass through areas that can be very busy with people and traffic. Always use pedestrian crossings.
Suitable for	<p>Families - Looking and listening for hidden waterways will appeal to all ages.</p> <p>The flights of steps are unsuitable for pushchairs and wheelchairs.</p>

Refreshments

There are plenty of shops, cafés, pubs and restaurants along the route. Historic pubs include The Blacksmith and Toffee Maker, The Coach and Horses, The Jerusalem Tavern, The Cock Pit, The Punch Tavern and The Black Friar.

The courtyard of St John's Priory (Stop 6) makes a nice place for a picnic.

Toilets

Toilets are available at the museums and for customers in the cafés and pubs.

Places to visit

Islington Museum (between Stops 4 and 5)

Open 10am to 5pm. Closed Wednesdays and Sundays.

Free entry.

http://www.islington.gov.uk/islington/history-heritage/heritage_museum/Pages/default.aspx

The Museum of the Order of St John (Stop 6)

Open 10am to 5pm, Mondays to Saturdays.

Free entry but donations encouraged for guided tours.

www.museumstjohn.org.uk

St Paul's Cathedral (near Stop 11)

Open for sightseeing 8.30am to 4pm, Mondays to Saturdays. Open Sundays for worship only. Weekday closures sometimes occur for special events.

Entry charges apply.

www.stpauls.co.uk

Visitor information

City Information Centre

St Paul's Churchyard between the Cathedral and Millennium Bridge.

Open daily.

www.visitlondon.com

1. Water, water everywhere...

Junction of St John Street and Chadwell Street

Water is a vital feature of most human settlements. London, built on the banks of the River Thames, is no exception. But the Thames is not the only water source in London. This walk explores how water has shaped this part of the capital, from natural springs to a once mighty river now reduced to a few drops.

We will discover how London's geography has been shaped by water and how it is still inscribed in the landscape today. This is also a water walk with a difference: we won't see much water until the end of the route but it will be all around us.



St John Street sloping downhill
© Rory Walsh

We begin here on the corner of St John Street and Chadwell Street as there are already two strong clues to how water has shaped the landscape. From here notice that St John Street runs distinctly downhill. Deep under our feet, this is where the junction of the Thames terrace gravels meets the overlying London clay. The reason why there are so many water-related features in this area is precisely because of this underlying geology.

Gravel is permeable which means that water can pass through it. Clay meanwhile is impermeable which means that it holds water. Where the Thames gravel meets the London clay a line of springs erupted. These became valuable sources of drinking water and sacred sites. Though they're no longer visible and long since built over, these natural wells are still preserved in some of the street names including Chadwell Street and nearby Goswell Street.

We won't be getting our feet wet on this walk but as these street names show we will be looking for clues in the urban landscape that point to London's watery past. From these clues we will discover how water has influenced the use and layout of the city.

Directions 1

Turn left into Arlington Way and follow it to The Shakespeare's Head pub. Turn right into Myddelton Passage. With a brick wall on your left, go to the end of Myddelton Passage where you will see two black gates on the left hand side. Enter the second gate to read the information boards on the New River. Then enter the first gate and follow the path down to the fountain for the next stop.

2. The New River

Gardens of the Nautilus Building, Myddelton Passage

This fountain is a nice reminder of this area's links with water. Before 1600 London's water supply came from the Thames as well as local streams, wells and springs. It was distributed around the capital on foot by water sellers.

In the late Middle Ages London's population grew, which caused both a greater demand and a drop in the water table as more and more people used local wells and springs. Especially here at the edges of London, people had to travel even further to get their daily supply.

To solve this problem a purpose-built waterway was constructed. Named the New River, it was a canal designed to bring fresh water to the capital from springs in Hertfordshire. Labourers were paid four pence a day to dig out a water channel, line its banks with clay and raise the riverside embankments.



The surviving engine and pump house buildings
© Rory Walsh

To maintain the flow the route followed the contours of the Lee Valley. The New River ran for almost forty miles and ended here in a reservoir at New River Head. Originally the water was gravity-fed to the City using hollowed out elm tree trunks. These extended as far west as Marylebone, as far east as Brick Lane and as far south as the Thames. You can see an example of one inside Islington Museum, which we will pass a little later.



New River Company plaque, Myddelton Passage
© Rory Walsh

Over time the pipes became leaky and gravity alone was not sufficient to carry the water far enough. First a windmill then later a steam engine were built to provide enough power to propel the water along the pipes and across London. Look for a yellow brick building with a turret on top. This was the engine and pump house that replaced the original windmill that stood nearby. Notice it was on a slightly elevated position to capture more wind.

On the way to the next stop, look for a plaque in Myddelton Passage on the block of flats. It shows the logo of the New River Company complete with its Latin motto 'et plui super unam civitatem' ('and I rained upon one city').

The New River still provides about eight percent of London's daily water. It feeds into the Thames Water Ring Main forty feet under our feet. The TWRM is one of the world's most advanced water distribution systems. This concrete-lined tunnel is eight feet in diameter - big enough to drive a car through. It runs in a 50-mile circle under the capital providing Londoners with a supply of drinking water equivalent to 700 Olympic sized swimming pools every day.



Map of Clerkenwell by James Tyrer (1805) - The New River Head and reservoirs are in the centre
 Wikimedia Commons (CCL)

Directions 2

Leave the garden and retrace your steps back along Myddleton Passage. At the end turn right. Cross the road using the pedestrian island and enter Spa Green Gardens through the black iron gate. Follow the path as it bends right then left to stop outside Wells House.

3. From spas to socialism

Wells House, Spa Green Estate

The name of this building and surrounding estate are more clues to this area's watery past. As we found out earlier, due to the underlying geology there were several natural springs in this part of London.

In 1683 Thomas Sadler found a well in his garden, near where Wells House stands today. Sadler's well became a fashionable spa, a place where London's wealthy came to 'take the waters'. Today the site is commemorated in the name of the



Taking the waters at Islington Spa, (1735)
© London Metropolitan Archives, City of London

famous dance theatre across the road - Sadlers Wells. Though urbanised now, this whole area was once a leafy retreat, a place of lime tree arbours and grassy walkways where the gentry could drink the curative waters, stroll and socialise. It was known as 'Islington Spa' or 'New Tunbridge Wells' after the town in Kent whose water was reputed to have healing properties.

Spas were thriving businesses in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In its heyday 1,600 people a day enjoyed the Islington Spa, paying to drink mineral water which claimed to cure 'hysterics, vapours, dropsies, scurvy, want of digestion and gout' amongst other ailments. The spring which fed the Islington Spa flowed until the 1860s but eventually the area was laid out for housing and the water source was built over.



The Outer Pond at New River Head with Islington Spa in the background (right),(1730)
© London Metropolitan Archives, City of London

The Spa Green housing estate too is worth a closer look. This was one of the first estates built after the Second World War when there was an urgent need for new social housing. Commissioned by the progressive Finsbury Council it was designed by Berthold Lubetkin, a socialist architect who thought that working class people should have high quality homes. You can see that the bold colours, curving lines and asymmetric designs are unlike the utilitarian grey concrete tower blocks of many other public housing estates from the same era.

Architectural historian Nikolaus Pevsner (whilst still not so admiring as other critics) described the flats as having 'a good deal of visual kick'. Though designed as social housing, many of the flats were sold off and today roughly a third are owned by 'Lubetkin enthusiasts' such as architects, designers and academics.



Social regeneration through Modernist architecture
© Jenny Lunn / Caroline Millar

Directions 3

Continue through the estate. On the right you will pass Hugh Myddelton Primary School (named after the entrepreneur who established the New River). Walk along Lloyd's Row then cross over St John Street to stop by the stone cattle trough outside the Blacksmith and Toffee Maker pub.

4. This little piggy went to market

Cattle trough, junction of Wynyatt Street and St John Street

This cattle trough, now an ornamental flower bed, tells another story of this area's rich history. Half a mile down the road is Smithfield meat market and this road, St John Street, was the main north-south thoroughfare for driving the cattle from pastures north of the city to meet their fate.

A livestock market in this part of London can be traced back as far the tenth century when this was an area of open countryside. The market took place in what was essentially a field. But as the population of the city grew, the market expanded.

By the nineteenth century 220,000 cattle and 1,500,000 sheep every year were being 'violently forced into an area of five acres... through its narrowest and most crowded thoroughfares'.

Charles Dickens evoked the squalid, violent atmosphere of the market in his book *Oliver Twist* published in 1838:

"It was market morning. The ground was covered nearly ankle deep with filth and mire; and a thick steam perpetually rising from the reeking bodies of the cattle, and mingling with the fog, which seemed to rest upon the chimney tops, hung heavily above [...]"

"Countrymen, butchers, drovers, hawkers, boys, thieves, idlers, and vagabonds of every low grade, were mingled together in a dense mass: the whistling of drovers, the barking of dogs, the bellowing and plunging of beasts, the bleating of sheep, and the grunting and squealing of pigs; the cries of hawkers, the shouts, oaths, and quarrelling on all sides, the ringing of bells, and the roar of voices that issued from every public house; the crowding, pushing, driving, beating, whooping and yelling; the hideous and discordant din that resounded from every corner of the market; and the unwashed, unshaven, squalid, and dirty figures constantly running to and fro, and bursting in and out of the throng, rendered it a stunning and bewildering scene which quite confused the senses."



Stone cattle trough with a new purpose
© Rory Walsh

Not long after *Oliver Twist* was published a campaign began to remove the livestock market and relocate it outside of the city. Not only was the market cruel and unsavoury but was a major threat to public health. Along with animal excrement, their butchered blood and carcasses were often dumped into the River Fleet. The Fleet had by then become a large open sewer where householders living along its banks dumped out their waste.

As we continue on the walk see if you can spot other drinking troughs along the route. Look out too for further clues in the local street names that point to this area's past - including Cowcross Street further along, where a bridge over the Fleet allowed livestock to cross the river.



The 'horrid abomination' of Smithfield open-air market, Illustrated London News (1885)
Wikimedia Commons (CCL)

Directions 4

With the trough behind you, turn left and continue along St John Street. You will pass Finsbury Library and Islington Museum across the road. If the Museum is open, do pop in to see an elm water pipe used on the New River.

From the museum, continue down St John Street and cross Skinner Street. At the next pedestrian crossing, near The Well pub, ensure you are on the left side of St John Street. Continue a short distance to a three storey redbrick building with a wide gateway into a courtyard. Go into the courtyard and stop in front of the building with a clock on top.

5. From ale to apartments

Former Cannon Brewery, Brewhouse Yard



Hop flowers (l) and barley (r) decorate the capitals of the old brewery; grooves in the courtyard created by horse and cart (centre)
© Rory Walsh

Stop in front of the clock tower and look closely at the ornamental carvings either side of the doorway. Those on the left depict hop flowers while on the right are sheaves of barley - two of the main ingredients for beer making. Also notice the heavy wooden gates you walked through and the entrance wide enough for a horse and cart. These are all clues that this was once a brewery.

This is the site of the Cannon Brewery which dates back to the early 1670s. The process of making beer and spirits uses a high volume of water so since earliest times breweries like Cannon were sited near natural springs and wells. In fact there was a cluster of breweries and distilleries in this area of Clerkenwell including Gordon's, Booth's and Nicholson's which all distilled gin.

The brewery buildings have long since been converted into high end apartments and offices while St John Street today is busy with modern traffic. In the nineteenth century brewers' drays delivered barrels of beer to all the local pubs and hostelryes and these streets would have rung to the clipping of horses' hooves and iron wheels on the primitive granite road. Look carefully as you leave the courtyard and you will see that little ruts have been carved into those granite stones from the thousands of drays that drove their barrels in and out of here over the years.

Directions 5

Turn left out of Brewer's Yard and continue along St John Street. At the traffic lights, turn right across the street and go into Clerkenwell Road. After about 50 metres you will come to St John's Square. Turn right and enter the Museum of the Order of St John. Go through into the courtyard and take a seat.

6. Medieval monastery

St John's Priory courtyard, St John's Square

The wide thoroughfare of Clerkenwell Road that we have just walked along would be unrecognisable to eighteenth-century Londoners. This was once a poor, overcrowded part of London, a warren of criss-crossing streets, courts, alleyways and decrepit houses rife with crime and disease.

In the nineteenth century these were razed to the ground as part of 'street improvements' and at least five thousand people were evicted from their homes. The historic St John's Square was cut in half by Clerkenwell Road and the character of the area changed forever.

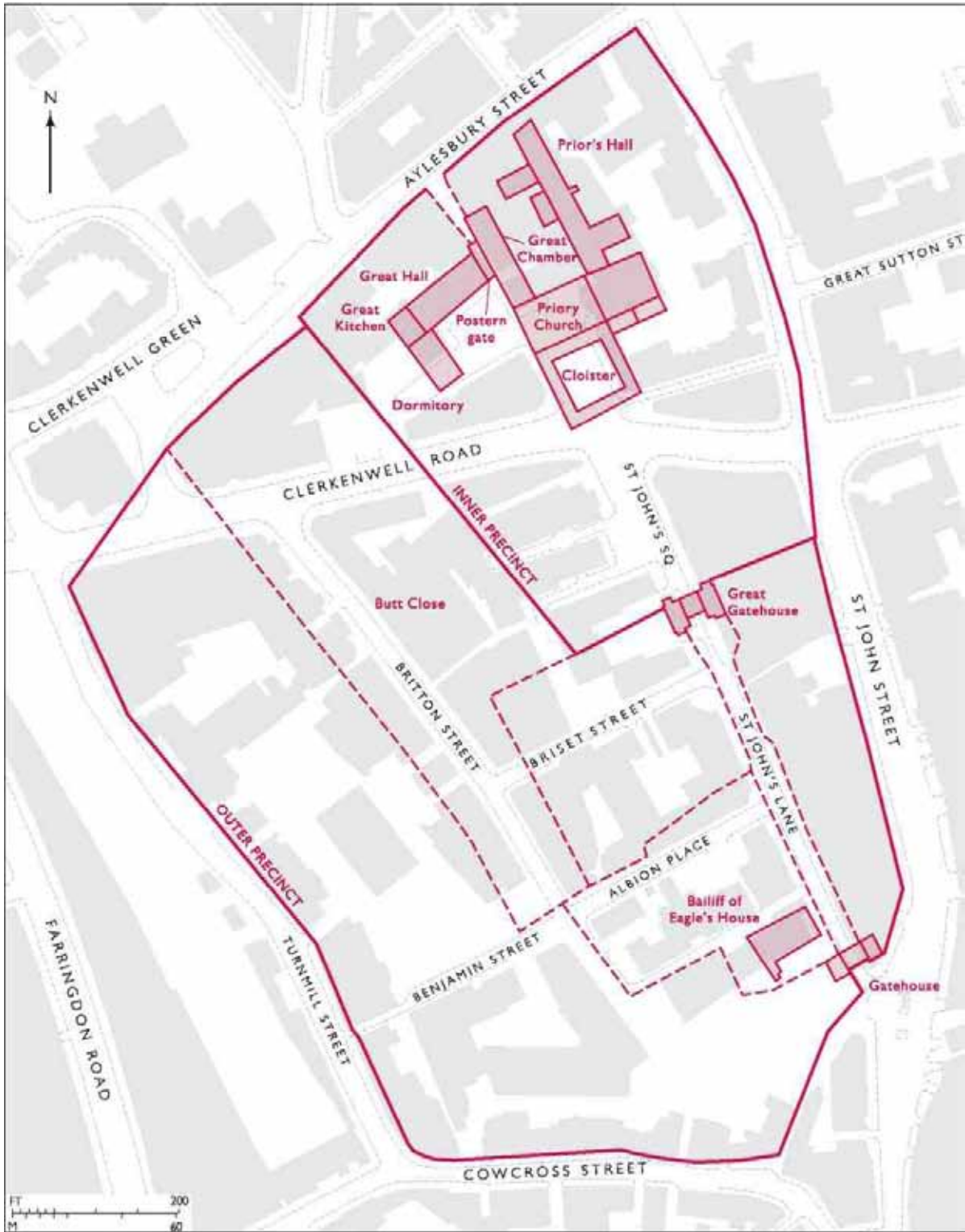


St John's Priory courtyard, an oasis of calm in the city
© Rory Walsh

Today, the crypt of St John's Priory and nearby St John's Gate are all that survive of a grand medieval monastery built on this site in 1144. The ten-acre priory was surrounded by fertile meadows of vineyards and gardens and bounded by the River Fleet along its western edge. Today's St John's Square was the priory's inner precinct. Take a look at the accompanying map to see the former extent of the monastery's grounds.



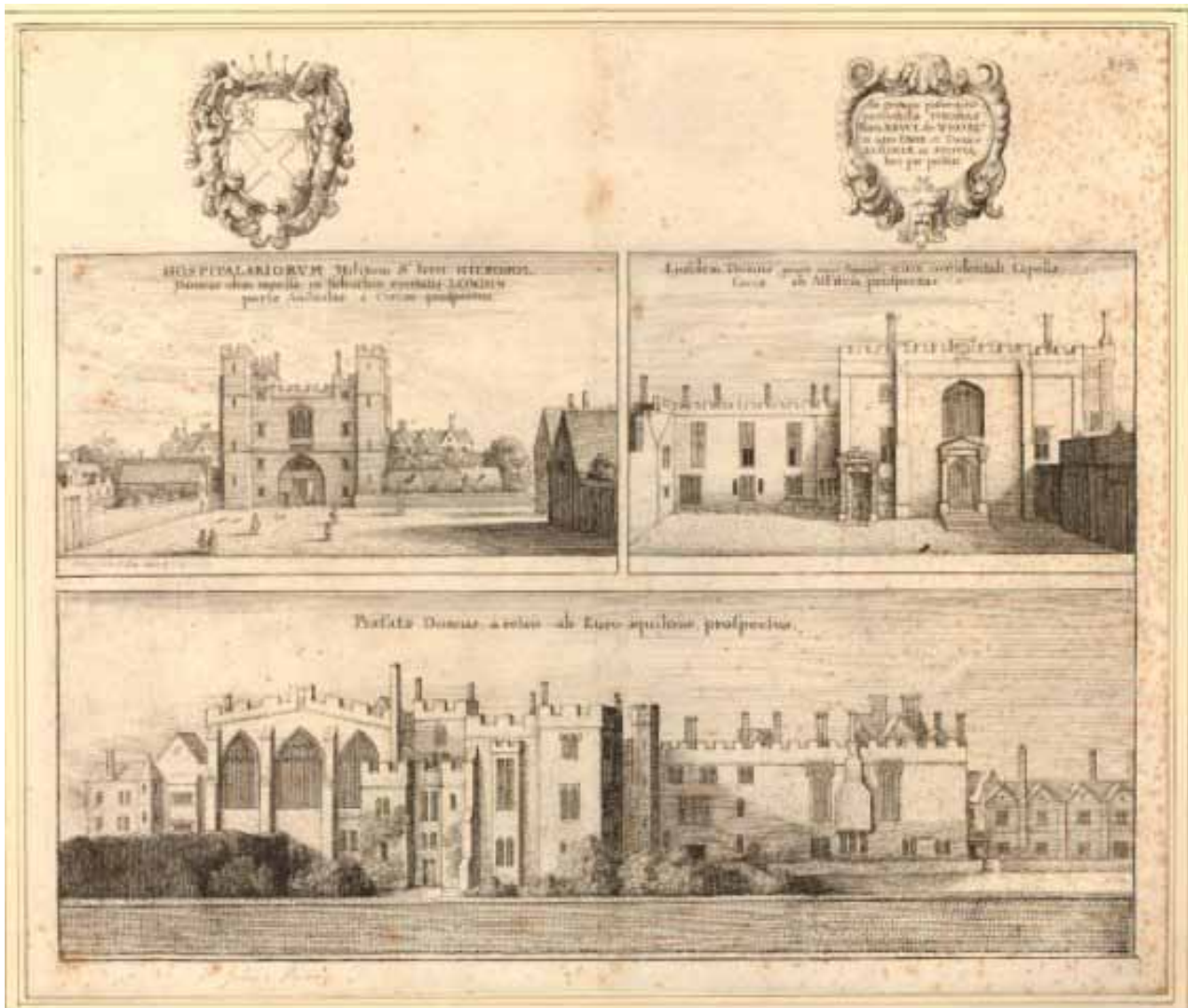
St John's Priory was one of many monastic sites to circle the City of London
© Rory Walsh



Modern street map showing the scale of St John's Priory
© Survey of London

Monasteries and priories surrounded much of the old city of London until they were dissolved by Henry VIII in the sixteenth century. The buildings have almost entirely disappeared but their names still persist in roads such as Blackfriars near Fleet Street and Austin Friars in the City.

Like the brewery that we saw earlier, religious houses were also big users of water. Records show that the priory owned at least one mill on the River Fleet, powered by two waterwheels. Records also show that the monks owned a wharf at Fleet Lane, near the current Ludgate Circus, where goods unloaded included corn, wine and firewood.



"Three views on one plate of the Priory of St John of Jerusalem, in Clerkenwell" by Wenceslaus Hollar (1661)
British Museum via Wikimedia Commons (CCL)

Directions 6a

Leave the courtyard and turn left. Carefully cross over Clerkenwell Road and continue into the other side of St John's Square. Stop by the large stone archway.



St John's Gate - a Victorian recreation of a Tudor gatehouse © Rory Walsh / Wikimedia Commons (CCL)

This is St John's Gate which, along with the crypt, is the only surviving relic of the medieval priory. It was originally built in 1504 as an entrance to the priory's inner precinct but the stone arch we can see today was heavily restored in the nineteenth century and rebuilt in the Tudor style.

This gateway has a long and colourful history. It was the home of both painter William Hogarth (famous for his 1751 satirical print 'Gin Lane') and the workplace of writer Samuel Johnson (most famous for compiling one of the first English dictionaries).

It was also the office of The Gentleman's Magazine. This was the first 'general interest' magazine (in the modern sense) to be published and ran for 200 years. Its founder, Edward Cave, also plays a part in the story of London's water. In 1740 he was behind a scheme to have part of the Fleet River dammed and built a mill to drive his new cotton spinning machine.

Directions 6b

With Clerkenwell Road behind you, turn right in front of the archway. Pass The Bear pub on your right and continue into an alleyway. You will emerge though an archway into Britton Street beside the Jerusalem Tavern pub. Turn left and you will see a four-storey building with six grey stone arches on the opposite side of the road. This was Nicholson's gin distillery - look up to the third floor to see five friezes depicting the process of gin production.

Retrace your steps past the Jerusalem Tavern and continue to the junction with Clerkenwell Road. Turn left, passing Fleet House at numbers 59-61. At the junction of Farringdon Lane and Turnmill Street turn right and cross the road into Farringdon Lane. Stop outside Well Court, building number 14-16 on the right hand side.

7. A lost river and a holy well

Well Court, 14-16 Farringdon Lane



'Entrance to the Fleet River' by Samuel Scott (c.1750) shows where The Fleet meets the Thames
- note the bridge spanning the Fleet and the size of the boats in its waters
Wikimedia Commons (CCL)

As you walked along Clerkenwell Road did you notice the land gently dipping down to meet the low lying urban chasm of Farringdon Lane? The Underground and mainline railway from Kings Cross and Farringdon stations now occupy this void but it was once something more spectacular. This was the valley of the River Fleet, one of London's most important rivers.

The Fleet is now entirely lost from view. It's almost impossible to imagine now but until around 160 years ago the Fleet was an open river rising in Hampstead Heath and flowing for four miles before emptying into the Thames at Blackfriars. Boats plied its waters moving heavy cargoes through London, including the stone to build the original St Paul's Cathedral. An anchor was found as far north as Kentish Town Road, suggesting that boats were able to navigate far inland.

This section of the Fleet was known as Turnmill Brook (from where Turnmill Street gets its name), a reference to the number of water powered 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'!

All this heavy industry took its toll and the Fleet became increasingly used as a sewer. Butchers at nearby Smithfield 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 summed it up:

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 here were diverted into an underground sewer and the Fleet was lost from sight.

Now peer through the windows of Well Court and look for a pump above a brick-lined hole deep in the bottom of the building. This is the Clerks' Well, the water source which gives this area its name – Clerkenwell.



Houses built along the Fleet used it as a sewer
Wikimedia Commons (CCL)



The Clerks' Well gave the area its name
© Rory Walsh

First noted as far back as 1183, the well was an important source of drinking water for medieval Londoners. Notice how low the well is - much lower than street level today. This shows you the change in ground level since the medieval period.

Though lost for many years, the well was rediscovered again in 1924 and has now been preserved. There were once many more wells, springs and rivers in this part of London which are now long gone, including of course the Fleet.

But though it's out of sight, the river hasn't disappeared altogether as we will find out at the next stop.

Directions 7

Continue along Farringdon Lane, bearing left across Ray Bridge. Cross over Farringdon Road using the pedestrian crossing to the right. Then turn right into Ray Street and stop outside The Coach and Horses pub.

8. The lowest of the low

Outside The Coach and Horses pub, Ray Street

On your way down Ray Street, notice again how you move from high to low ground as you re-enter the valley of the River Fleet. Before being renamed Ray Street, this area was known as Hockley-in-the-Hole. Hockley means 'muddy field' in Saxon and is another clue to the lost river which used to flow through this neighbourhood.

Notice too some of the botanical sounding street names nearby – Herbal Hill, Saffron Hill, Hatton Gardens and Vine Hill. These names are reminders that this area was once the gardens of Ely Palace, the medieval home of the Bishop of Ely built on the banks of the River Fleet.



Old and new street names...
© Rory Walsh

By the beginning of the eighteenth century Hockley-in-the-Hole had become one of the most infamous areas of London. The dark, narrow, twisting streets were full of dilapidated houses. Poverty and crime were endemic. It was the haunt of thieves, highwaymen and gamblers. Next to The Coach and Horses pub was a garden where men fought with swords or wrestled for money. Bear and bull baiting, dog and cock fighting were rife.



Brawling and carousing at Hockley-in-the-Hole - today's Ray Street
© Look and Learn

If this doesn't sound like the Ray Street you can see today that's because this area was subject to similar slum clearances and street improvements as Clerkenwell. Hockley-in-the-Hole was razed to the ground with the road widened, raised, drained and renamed Ray Street. On these modern, remodelled streets it's really hard to imagine what the river must have been like, but there is a spot where you can at least still hear it.

With your back to the pub, you will see a metal grid in the middle of the street. Please be very careful here as cars and vans still use the road. If you put your ear down to the grating, the sound of rushing water you should hear is the Fleet. Peer into the dark and you may be able to see it as a fast running stream deep below. It is remarkable to think that in this dense urban part of London there is a rushing river just beneath our feet.



Beneath your feet rushes the River Fleet
© Caroline Millar

Directions 8

Cross the road from the pub and go up Back Hill. At the junction with Clerkenwell Road turn left and continue for about 50 metres. Use the next pedestrian crossing to cross over into the narrow road called Saffron Hill opposite. Go along Saffron Hill and stop at the junction with Greville Street.

9. Den of thieves

Junction of Saffron Hill and Greville Street

Today this narrow street of high-sided buildings is home to publishers, printers, media companies and graphic designers - a world away from its origins as the saffron growing fields of Ely Palace.

By the nineteenth century this street was already unrecognisable from its aromatic past. Saffron Hill ran along the edge of what was then an open sewer – the Fleet Ditch. This area became a notorious slum, a tangle of labyrinthine streets, alleys and courtyards.

Saffron Hill was where Charles Dickens chose to locate Fagin’s den in *Oliver Twist*:



The junction of Saffron Hill and Greville Street
© Caroline Millar



Stolen handkerchiefs hanging in Field Lane (now Shoe Lane)
© Old and New London / British History Online

“In its filthy shops are exposed for sale huge bunches of second-hand silk handkerchiefs, of all sizes and patterns; for here reside the traders who purchase them from pickpockets. Hundreds of these handkerchiefs hang dangling from pegs outside the windows or flaunting from the door-posts; and the shelves, within, are piled with them [...]”

“It is a commercial colony of itself: the emporium of petty larceny: visited at early morning, and setting-in of dusk, by silent merchants, who traffic in dark back-parlours, and who go as strangely as they come. Here, the clothesman, the shoe-vamper, and the rag-merchant, display their goods, as sign-boards to the petty thief; here, stores of old iron and bones, and heaps of mildewy fragments of woollen-stuff and linen, rust and rot in the grimy cellars.”

So why did Dickens set the scenes of Fagin and his pickpockets here? Saffron Hill was known as a 'liberty' - a part of town where the police had no jurisdiction. On one side of it is the City of London, on the other side the parish of Holborn, but none of the parish watches in the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries could enter Saffron Hill.

Our walk along Saffron Hill continues to trace the 'lost' underground Fleet River. At this junction with Greville Street is another grid in the road where you can see and hear the rushing river.

On the way to the next stop you will reach a set of steps at the very end of Saffron Hill. Notice the big difference in height between the low-lying area you are in and the street above. This is another indication of the depth of the Fleet Valley and the size of the river. We will find out more about this at the next stop.



The steep downward slope and steps at the end of Saffron Hill reflect the contours of the Fleet valley
© Caroline Millar / Rory Walsh

Directions 9

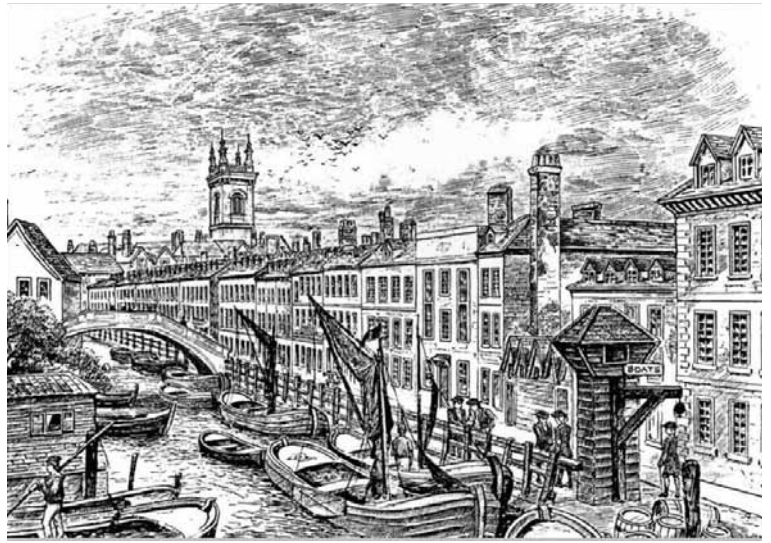
Continue along the slope to the end of Saffron Hill. At the top of the steps turn left then right along Farringdon Street towards Holborn Viaduct (the red bridge). Just before the bridge enter the white building on your right with three arched doorways. Walk up the steps (passing a large scale image showing the construction of the Metropolitan Railway through the Fleet Valley) to emerge onto Holborn Bridge. Carefully cross over the road to the other side of the bridge. Stand in the middle and look down at the road below.

10. A river ran through it

View of Farringdon Street from Holborn Viaduct

The top of Holborn Viaduct is a good place to get a sense of just how big the Fleet River once was. The wide thoroughfare you are looking down on is the river valley where the Fleet flowed downhill to meet the Thames.

It's difficult to imagine now but this bridge you are standing on was once at street level. The Holborn Viaduct, which replaced an older medieval bridge, is 1,400 feet deep and 80 feet across. You can picture just how deep the river valley was at this point.



The boat lined banks of the Fleet in the 1700s
Copyright unknown



A bridge over The Fleet from Alexander Pope's
The Dunciad (1728) - the emaciated bathers are
a satirical comment on the water quality
Wikimedia Commons (CCL)

In its heyday, the Fleet inlet was the busiest port in London. Broad wharves lined its banks for loading and unloading goods, including corn, hay, firewood, Welsh cheese, oysters and herrings. It must have been quite a sight to see boats sailing here!

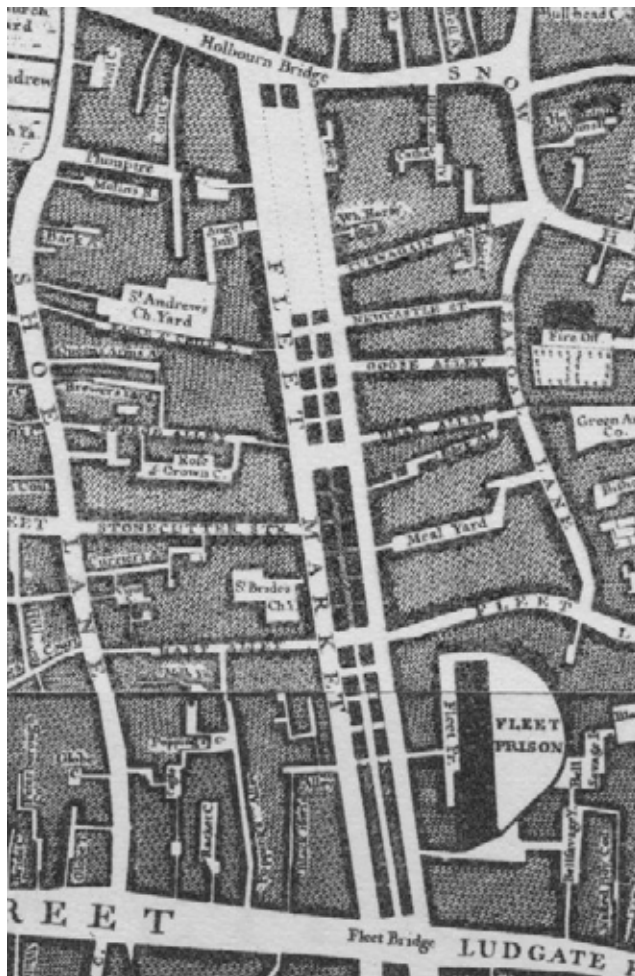
Here the Fleet River was known as 'Holebourne' meaning 'the stream in the hollow' and gave the area of Holborn its name. The origins of the name 'Fleet' are said to be from Anglo-Saxon and mean a tidal inlet capable of floating a boat.

Most rivers don't flow in a straight line but you will notice that Farringdon Street is long, straight and unbending. After the Great Fire of London in 1666 this section of the Fleet was straightened and canalised and became known as the New Canal.

As we heard earlier the New Canal became an unsanitary ditch and was gradually covered over. From 1737 a market was held on the culverted river. This soon became an obstacle to the increasing traffic levels in the area and so Farringdon Road was created on the site.

As you continue to the next stop at Ludgate Circus, notice some of the street names on the left hand side. Turnagain Lane marks the point where barges were turned around to sail back out to the Thames. Old Seacoal Lane and Newcastle Close are reminders that coal was brought by ships from the Northeast of England and unloaded at wharves here along the banks of the Fleet.

Before leaving the bridge notice the statue of Hugh Myddelton above the Fable Pub. You might remember him as the entrepreneur who built the New River, which we found out about near the start of the walk.



Left: a Griffin on Holborn Viaduct overlooks the Fleet valley
Right: Map of London showing the Fleet Market built over the culverted river (1746)
© Caroline Millar / Wikimedia Commons (CCL)

Directions 10

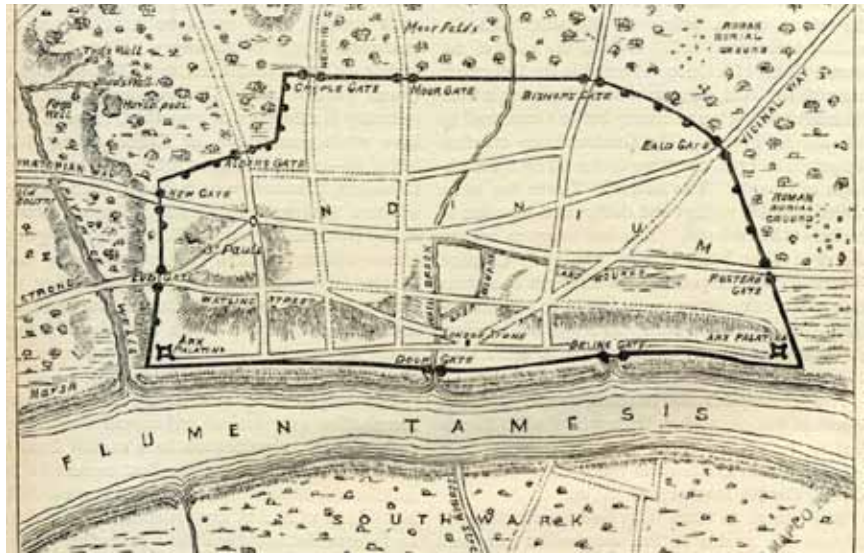
Turn left and take the set of steps back down to Farringdon Street that are underneath the statue of Thomas Gresham. At the bottom of the steps turn left and continue to Ludgate Circus.

11. City on a hill

Ludgate Circus

The busy junction of Ludgate Circus is where Farringdon Street crosses over Fleet Street. As you stand at this crossroads, notice that you are in an elevated position and of the four streets which meet here, three of them dip downhill.

Ludgate Circus is the site of an ancient crossing point, where a ford once carried Fleet Street across the Fleet River. Later the ford was replaced by a bridge and over time this became a busy thoroughfare and road junction.



Map of the Roman city shows the Fleet (River of Wells) and the hill of St Paul's
© Copyright David Hale / MAPCO 2006-2013



The Ludgate once stood near the Fleet crossing
Wikimedia Commons (CCL)

When Ludgate Circus was built in the late-nineteenth century to connect the city of Westminster with the city of London, the granite for its construction was brought all the way from Haytor on Dartmoor.

Notice how the street to your left, Ludgate Hill, rises up steeply towards St Paul's Cathedral. This is the hill where the Romans first established the city. The Fleet ran along its western edge, the River Wallbrook through the middle and the Thames to the south. That left the north side exposed so the Romans built a three-mile long wall to protect it.

Some fragments of the Roman wall still survive but it mostly still exists in street names, including Bishopsgate, Aldgate, Newgate and here - Ludgate.

Directions 11

To reach the next stop you will need to be on the left hand side of Fleet Street. With St Paul's Cathedral on your left cross over Ludgate Circus then turn right and cross over at the next set of traffic lights. Continue into Fleet Street then take the first left past The Punch Tavern pub, Bride's Lane. Turn right up a small set of steps into St Bride's Avenue then go left to enter the churchyard.

12. Read all about it

St Bride's Churchyard, St Bride's Avenue

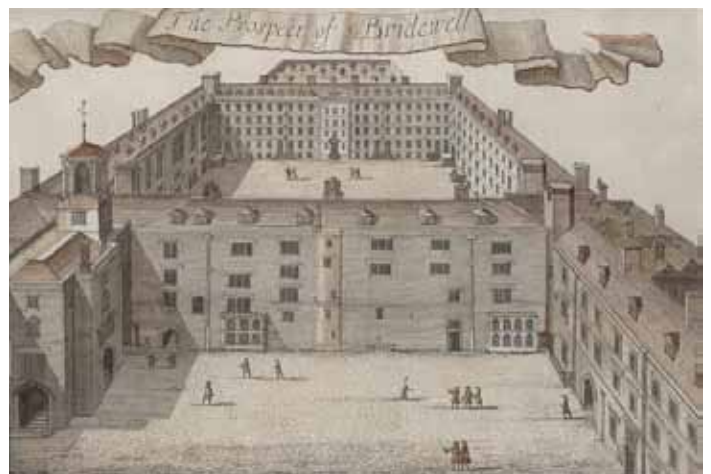
Stop in the peaceful churchyard of St Bride's to escape the hustle and bustle of Fleet Street.

If you wander round this area you will see the name St Bride's crops up everywhere. Once again, as with the Clerks' Well and the Spa Green Estate, a well was discovered here and the water was reputed to have healing qualities. A plane tree at the back of the churchyard is said to stand on the site of the well.

The Bride's Well gave its name to many of the features and buildings in this area including the sixteenth century Bridewell Palace which was built for Henry VIII. Look at the map and see if you can spot a small side street called Watergate further down on the right. This gate was originally the river entrance to the palace through which boats could sail in and out.

Until the 1980s nearby Fleet Street was the centre of British newspaper production. Though most newspapers have since moved to Canary Wharf we still use the term 'Fleet Street' as a stand-in for the newspaper industry.

St Bride's Church is the spiritual home of the industry and was regularly frequented by journalists and printers. One thing that the printers used in abundance was water and the Fleet River provided them with plenty of it.



Top; Fleet Street thronged with horse and carts (c1890)
Above: 'Prospect of Bridewell Palace' (1720)
Wikimedia Commons (CCL)

Directions 12

Go back down the steps to Bride Lane. Turn right then left past the St Bride's Foundation to reach New Bridge Street. Turn right, cross the road then take the next turn into Apothecary Street. Take the steps over the railway line then turn right at the bottom to pass the Apothecaries Hall. Turn left into Playhouse Yard and go straight ahead into Ireland Yard. After a few yards you will see some black gates and steps up into a churchyard garden on the left. Stop at the top of the steps.

13. Monochrome monks

St Ann Blackfriars churchyard, Ireland Yard

The pile of rubble at the top of the steps is all that remains of Blackfriars Priory, another large monastic complex now mostly memorialised in the name of Blackfriars Station and Embankment. Built in 1221 Blackfriars is perhaps the most famous of London's vanished abbeys.

In fact Blackfriars was one of two monasteries situated on the banks of the River Fleet. Not surprisingly it got its name from the black cloaks worn by the Dominican monks. Whitefriars, which occupied a site on the opposite bank, was a Carmelite priory where the monks wore white cloaks over their robes.



Remains of Blackfriars priory wall
© Rory Walsh

While this uneven wall is all that remains of Blackfriars monastery, it's only in street names (and a surviving crypt) that we remember Whitefriars. During its heyday in the late-fourteenth century, the Whitefriars monastic complex sprawled from Fleet Street to the Thames. A church, cloisters, garden and cemetery were housed in its grounds.

Like St John's Priory in Clerkenwell, both Blackfriars and Whitefriars made great use of their watery locations. The monks used the Fleet River to provide water for drinking, washing, watering crops and powering mills to produce energy. The Fleet was also a vital transport route that allowed the monks to bring in goods and export their produce.

On your way to the last stop at Blackfriars Bridge, stop outside The Blackfriar pub on the corner of Queen Victoria Street and New Bridge Street. Take time to look at the mosaic over the door, which depicts the monastery and its black-cloaked monks fishing in the Fleet.

Directions 13

Continue to the end of Ireland Yard and turn right down St Andrews Hill to meet Queen Victoria Street. Turn right and continue up to The Blackfriar pub. When you are ready, cross Queen Victoria Street with the pub behind you and head towards Blackfriars station. Pass the station on your left and continue onto Blackfriars Bridge. Go down the steps to the riverside path and stop directly below the bridge. Look for a metal ladder leading down into the water. At low tide you may be able to see a steel manhole cover to the right.

14. The last drop

Underneath Blackfriars Bridge

This spot below Blackfriars Bridge is where the Fleet empties into the Thames. At low tide you may be able to see the manhole cover in the embankment wall. After heavy rain you might even see a few drops of water dripping out of it.

Fittingly for a water walk without water, it's perhaps a disappointing end for what was once one of London's main arteries - a source of drinking water, power, transport and pleasure reduced to a few drops.



Under Blackfriars Bridge where the Fleet drips into the Thames
Wikimedia Commons (CCL)

We began our walk on the Thames terrace gravels of Islington and Clerkenwell where we found out how London's geology has shaped the lie of the land. We noticed the influence of water on street inclines and in local names. We found evidence of the New River, a canal built in the 1600s to bring fresh water to London as its population rapidly expanded, and saw the site of several springs and wells which brought prosperity and renewed health to London's people. We also found evidence of the route cattle were driven to market and found out how Smithfield meat market and other local industries turned the Fleet River into a filthy ditch.



Blackfriars Bridge, St Paul's Cathedral and the mighty Thames (1828)
Wikimedia Commons (CCL)

We found evidence of three of London's most important monastic centres, along with breweries, distilleries and the newspaper industry all located along the banks of the River Fleet and relying on its water for their existence. We have seen streets transformed from slums, found holy wells and finished our walk at one of the most famous rivers in the world.

Walking round a city like London with its many street-level distractions it's easy to forget what is just beneath your feet. This walk gives you an opportunity to think about the unseen forces that have shaped our landscape and to achieve the magical feat of walking on water...



Street names revealing hidden water sources
© Caroline Millar / Rory Walsh

Directions 14

To return to Angel and Islington you can take the Underground from Blackfriars station. Take the District or Circle Line eastbound then change at Monument for the Northern Line via Bank. Alternatively take the Circle Line eastbound to King's Cross and change for the Northern Line.

Further information

'London's Lost Rivers: A Walker's Guide' by Tom Bolton

<http://strangeattractor.co.uk/books/londons-lost-rivers-a-walkers-guide>

The Blackfriar pub

www.nicholsonspubs.co.uk/theblackfriarblackfriarslondon

Clerks' Well

http://www.islington.gov.uk/islington/history-heritage/heritage_borough/bor_sites/Pages/clerkswell.aspx

The Museum of the Order of St John

www.museumstjohn.org.uk

New River Action Group

<http://newriver.org.uk>

Sadler's Wells Theatre

www.sadlerswells.com

Smithfield Market

www.smithfieldmarket.com

St Bride's Church

www.stbrides.com

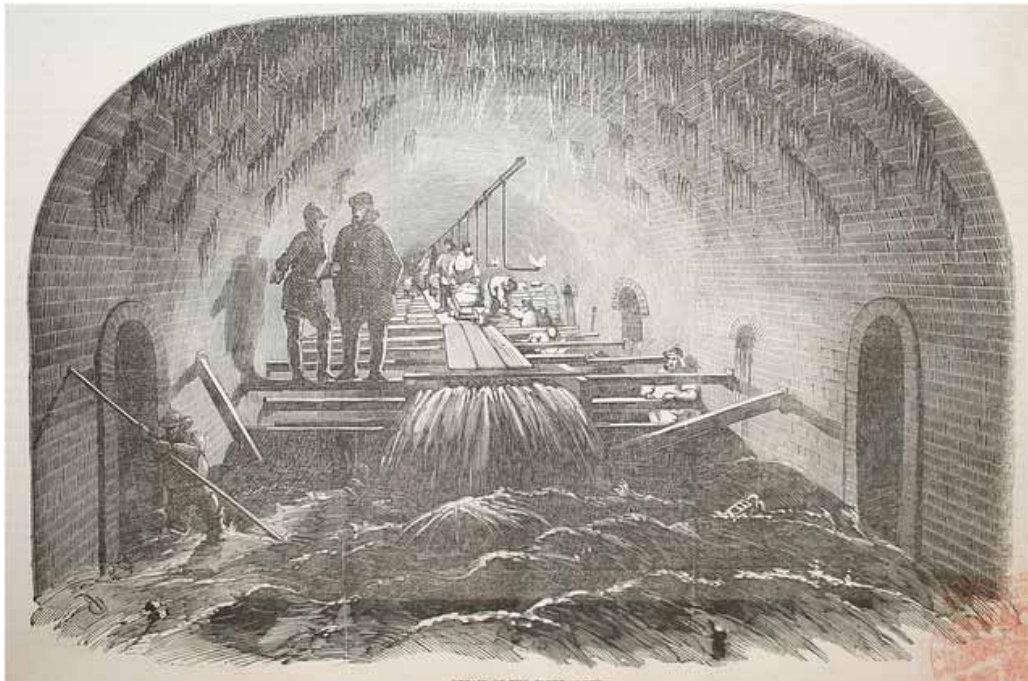
St Paul's Cathedral

www.stpauls.co.uk

Credits

The RGS-IBG would like to thank the following people and organisations for their assistance in producing this Discovering Britain walk:

- **Professor David Green** for suggesting the walk route and theme
- **Caroline Millar** for compiling the walk materials, providing photographs, editing the walk resources and audio files
- **Jenny Lunn** for editing the walk resources and providing photographs
- **Rory Walsh** for providing photographs and testing the route
- **Tom Bolton** for suggestions to the text
- **Carrie von Lieshout** for information on The New River
- **Ted Hatch** for lending an invaluable book and for his interest and enthusiasm
- **British History Online, London Metropolitan Archives, The London Survey, Victorian London, Look and Learn Picture Gallery** and **David Hale/Mapco** for kind permission to include images from their collections



Repairs to the Fleet Sewer
Copyright unknown

Try other walks in the Discovering Britain series elsewhere along the River Thames

City of streams and spires

Explore Oxford's fascinating network of waterways

<http://www.discoveringbritain.org/walks/region/south-east-england/oxford-waterways.html>



Tales of a riverbank

Livelihood, leisure and literature along the River Thames at Marlow

<http://www.discoveringbritain.org/walks/region/south-east-england/marlow.html>



Ebb and flow

Explore the non-tidal River Thames between Molesey and Kingston

<http://www.discoveringbritain.org/walks/region/greater-london/london-kingston.html>



Transforming the riverside

Discover stories behind the redevelopment of the River Thames in central London

<http://www.discoveringbritain.org/walks/region/greater-london/london-south-bank.html>



Trains and boats and planes

Explore the changing riverside and docks at North Woolwich

<http://www.discoveringbritain.org/walks/region/greater-london/london-woolwich.html>



Neither land nor sea

Discover the tidal creeks and mudflats of the Thames Estuary in Essex

<http://www.discoveringbritain.org/walks/region/east-of-england/essex-estuary.html>





Britain's landscapes are wonderful.

There is a tremendous variety within our shores – whether in the countryside, in towns and cities or at the seaside. And every landscape has a story to tell about our past and present.

Discovering Britain is an exciting series of geographically-themed walks that aim to bring these stories alive and inspire everyone to explore and learn more about Britain. Each walk looks at a particular landscape, finding out about how forces of nature, people, events and the economy have created what you see today.

The self-guided walks are fun, informative and inspiring. Prepare to discover something new, to be surprised and to find the unexpected.

Visit www.discoveringbritain.org to

Send your review of this walk

Search for other walks

Suggest a new walk