

A CURIOUS GUIDE TO LONDON



TALES OF A CITY

SIMON LEYLAND

ABOUT THE BOOK

From **petticoat duels** and **lucky cats** to the **Stiffs Express**, **Lord Nelson's spare nose**, the **Piccadilly earthquake** and the **Great Beer Flood of 1814**, *A Curious Guide to London* takes you on a captivating, wildly entertaining tour of the city you think you know, unearthing the capital's secrets and commemorating its rich and colourful history .

Brimming with tales of London's forgotten past, its strangest traditions and its most eccentric inhabitants, this book celebrates the unique, the unusual and the unknown.

Perfect for tourists and day trippers as well as the millions of people who call London home, this alternative guidebook will make you look at the city in a whole new light.

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A CURIOUS GUIDE TO LONDON

TALES OF A CITY

SIMON LEYLAND

You are now
In London, that great sea, whose ebb and flow
At once is deaf and loud, and on the shore
Vomits its wrecks, and still howls on for more.
Yet in its depth what treasures!

Letter to Maria Gisborne, 1820
Percy Bysshe Shelley

INTRODUCTION

This collection of tales can be blamed on a London Underground strike, a rainy evening and a pub in Moorgate.

A few years ago, when I was still pretending to enjoy life in the Square Mile, I was walking along London Wall on the way to Moorgate Underground station when the heavens opened. Quickly dashing through the puddles, I discovered the entrance closed due to a previously unannounced strike. As is the way when it rains in London, there are never any taxis to be found; and when there is a tube strike, it is almost impossible to get on a bus. So I did what any responsible adult would do: I decided to get out of the rain and go to a pub for a pint or two while I reviewed my options.

The pub was strangely quiet considering the time of day and the events unfurling outside. I ordered a pint and sat down at the bar looking at the rain through the window. No sooner had I taken my first sip than a slightly dishevelled elderly man wearing an Evening Standard waterproof jacket sat down beside me and started talking to me as if I were a long-lost friend.

I initially thought the poor old sod was one of life's unfortunates, but how wrong can you be. His name was Alf, he had been selling newspapers on the corner of London Wall and Moorgate for over twenty years, and he started to regale me with stories of a London that I never knew. The man was a born storyteller, and in return for several light and bitters, he kept me amused until closing time, when I bade him farewell and left for home.

I had assumed that his anecdotes were all tall tales and completely dismissed them from my thoughts until a chance meeting at a dinner party, when I was introduced to a rather severe-looking fellow who claimed to be a local historian. Remembering my encounter with Alf, I asked him about a couple of the stories he had told me. They were in fact all totally true.

The following Monday, I made my way back along London Wall to reacquaint myself with my new friend, but he was nowhere to be seen. I subsequently discovered that the day I met him had been his last day at work.

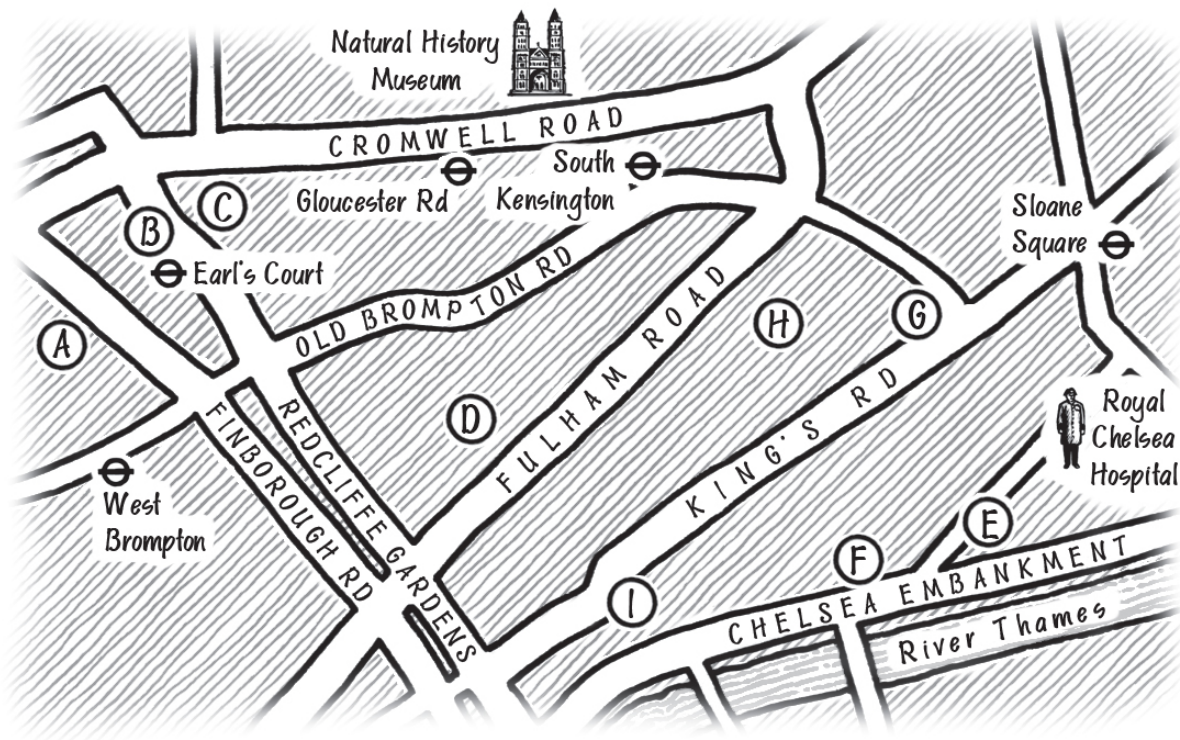
With my interest piqued, I started to research the subject and was amazed at how many little-known stories and curious tales London had to offer – hardly surprising considering the city has been around for over two thousand years, has burned down several times, been rebuilt, been bombed in two world wars and been rebuilt again.

There are many books about London, and if you are looking for a scholarly treatise on the history of this great city I fear you must look elsewhere. Likewise, if you were expecting an earnest discussion on the social fabric of London you will be sorely disappointed.

This book is unashamedly light-hearted and has been written for people like myself who take delight in the strange and absurd – such as where Rimbaud hit Verlaine with a fish; why you can't tell the time in Bermondsey; the location of Farting Lane; and where a man was killed by a falling penis.

What follows are the results of my beer-fuelled endeavours. I hope it delights, astonishes and fascinates in equal measure, and that it inspires you to look at the city in a new light.

KENSINGTON AND CHELSEA



The First London Eye

 *Earls Court Exhibition Centre, Warwick Road*
MAP: A

The first giant Ferris wheel in London was erected for the Empire of India Exhibition at Earls Court in 1894.

Built by two young Australian engineers named Adam Gaddelin and Gareth Watson, the Great Wheel, as it was known, was modelled on the original Ferris wheel that had appeared in Chicago the year before. It was 300 feet high (compared with 442 feet for the London Eye today) and was capable of carrying twelve hundred passengers in its forty carriages. The wheel caused enormous excitement and it remained in use for several years. On the evening of 6 May 1906, however, it got stuck and seventy-four people in the upper carriages who could not climb down had to stay there all night. Tea and sandwiches were hoisted up and the unlucky passengers were finally brought down by the fire brigade the following morning. There followed a splendid rumour that the Victorian equivalent of the Mile High Club had gained its first members. As a result, an employee with a pair of binoculars was tasked with spying on the carriages to make sure no impropriety took place.

The wheel stayed in service until later that year, by which time it had carried over 2.5 million passengers.

Bumper Harris and Escalator Etiquette

 *Earl's Court Underground Station, Earls Court Road*
MAP: B

The inaugural London Underground line opened in January 1863 between Paddington and Farringdon, and was the first of its kind in the world.

In 1910 the tube introduced its first escalator at Earl's Court station. Passengers initially were very wary of it, so in order to prove the safety of this new contraption the Underground operators came up with the novel idea of employing someone to ride the escalator all day. So began the career of Bumper Harris, a man with a wooden leg – thereby demonstrating that if it was safe for a man with a disability, then it was safe for all – who continued to go up and down for several years until the public eventually took to these new moving staircases.

In many countries, escalator etiquette demands that travellers stand on the left and walk on the right, but on the London Underground it has always been the other way round. A recently restored silent film from the 1920s may explain why. *Underground*, the first film to feature extensive footage of the tube, shows that due to the design of early escalators it was necessary to step off with the right foot. Unlike modern comb escalators, where the end of the stairway is straight, older shunt escalators ended in a diagonal so the stairway finished sooner for the right foot than for the left. Passengers who chose not to walk up or down the escalators were therefore asked to stand on the

right so that anyone wishing to overtake them at the end would be able to take advantage of the extra section of moving stairway.

And as a result, the convention of standing on the right has been fiercely enforced by the travelling public ever since – as many an unsuspecting tourist who has stood on the left during rush hour can testify.

Corpse Candles

 *Hogarth Road*

MAP: C

The autumn of 1835 saw the introduction of a new type of candle called the 'composition candle'. It burned cleanly, but at the same cost as the inferior tallow candle, which was made from animal fat and tended to splutter when burning.

These new candles were created by Joseph Gay-Lussac and Michel Chevreul, two French scientists, who separated tallow into two parts: one liquid, and one solid which they called 'stearine'. The stearine had a higher melting point than crude tallow and a secret ingredient was added to prevent the candles becoming brittle. The Frenchmen sold their 'secret' recipe to Warner & Sons of Hogarth Road, who became very prosperous through the manufacture of these candles.

One night, however, a London chemist, a Mr Everitt, was extinguishing his candle when he noticed an 'abominable stinking smell like garlic, the characteristic smell given off by arsenical vapours'.



The Westminster Medical Society conducted an investigation and concluded that the 'secret' ingredient was in fact arsenic – odourless while the candle burned, the smell only being released when it was snuffed out. The society then put forward the following scenario: 'What if London's Theatre Royal, Drury Lane were lighted with stearine candles [each chandelier held 152 tapers] . . . 608 grains of arsenious acid would be vaporised and floating in the air during the performance. Is anyone prepared to assert that [no one] would receive the slightest injury?' Composition candles were banned the following year.

Somewhat bizarrely, although it had long been well known as a poison, doctors for centuries had prescribed arsenic for their patients, and in 1809 Fowler's Solution, a mixture of potassium arsenite and lavender commonly taken as a tonic, was accepted into the London Pharmacopoeia and was praised by the *Edinburgh Medical and Surgical Journal* as 'almost as certain a medicine as we possess throughout the whole range of our materia medica'. It also appears that it was popular amongst

certain men who took it in the hope of increasing 'energy, endurance and virility' in the bedroom.

Incredibly, lessons had not been learned. The arsenic problem returned again in 1859, only this time in the form of a colouring used for home furnishings and fabric – Scheele's Green. People dropped like flies after having their drawing rooms re-papered in 'the rage for green', which *Punch* came to call 'the hue of death, the tint of the grave'. There were reports of children wasting away in bright green rooms, of ladies in green dresses swooning, and newspaper printers being overcome by arsenic vapours. Many scholars believe that Napoleon's death in St Helena in 1821 was due to the green wallpaper in his bedroom.



The Tichborne Claimant

 14 Harley Gardens

MAP: D

This is where Arthur Orton, also known as Sir Roger Tichborne, lived during his trial as the Tichborne Claimant – a story which has all the elements of a Victorian melodrama.

In 1854, whilst on a sea voyage, a wealthy young aristocrat named Roger Charles Doughty Tichborne disappeared and was presumed dead. His mother, refusing to believe he had actually died, placed advertisements in newspapers around the world seeking information on his whereabouts. In the spring of 1866 she received a letter from an Australian man in Wagga Wagga who claimed to be her son. Thus began one of the greatest mysteries of the time.

There were significant differences between the Australian claimant and Roger Tichborne. Tichborne was very slight of figure and spoke fluent French when he disappeared. The man from Wagga Wagga weighed over twenty stone, spoke no French and had a very pronounced Australian accent. However, there was a facial resemblance between the two.

Lady Tichborne embraced the Australian man as her long-lost son, making him the full heir to her estate. But upon her death, the family took legal action to prevent him from accessing the inheritance. What followed was one of the most sensational trials of the Victorian age. At a time when very few people owned any form of personal documentation, the case hinged on his proving his identity in a court of law.

Investigators were sent to Australia and alleged that the claimant was in fact a butcher's son from Wapping called Arthur Orton, who had moved to Australia. Under cross-examination, he proved unable to remember the simplest facts about the past of Roger Tichborne. The court ruled in the family's favour and in 1874 the Tichborne Claimant was convicted on two counts of perjury and sentenced to fourteen years' hard labour.

He served ten years in prison before being released in 1884. For the next couple of years he travelled around the music halls trying to make a living from his celebrity status, but eventually interest in the case waned and Orton lived out the rest of his life in near poverty, still claiming to be Sir Roger right up until his death in 1898.

It seems almost certain that the Australian man was a fraud, but when he died the family allowed the name 'Sir Roger Charles Doughty Tichborne' to be inscribed on his tombstone.

The Physic Garden and *The Day of the Triffids*

 66 Royal Hospital Road

MAP: E

During the Second World War, whilst working as a censor at the Ministry of Information, the writer John Wyndham used to come to the Chelsea Physic Garden for his lunch breaks.

One particular lunchtime he was said to have seen a strange-looking shrub which later formed the idea of the 'triffid' in his bestselling book *The Day of the Triffids*, published in 1951.

Established as a nursery for trainee apothecaries in 1673, the Chelsea Physic Garden is the second oldest botanical garden in Britain, after the University of Oxford Botanic Garden, which was founded in 1621.

In 1732 cotton seeds from the garden were sent to James Oglethorpe, founder of the state of Georgia, who used them to establish the American cotton industry.

Giant's Teeth and Job's Tears

 18 Cheyne Walk

MAP: F

London's first public museum opened in a coffee house on this site, near Chelsea Old Church, in 1695.

It was originally a barber's shop whose proprietor, James Salter - or Don Saltero, as he later became known - had once been employed as travelling valet to Sir Hans Sloane, whose collection formed the basis of the British Museum. Sloane began to donate unwanted objects to Salter, who took them to his shop, displayed them in cabinets around the walls and invited the public to come in.

As word about the collection spread, the barber's shop evolved into Don Saltero's Coffee House and Curiosity Museum. He promoted it as a place of marvels and wonder, as an advertisement placed in *Mist's Weekly Journal* in 1728 shows:

**Monsters of all sorts here are seen,
Strange things in Nature as they grew so,
Some relics of the Sheba Queen,
And fragments of the famed Bob Crusoe.
Knick-knacks, too, dangle round the wall,
Some in glass-cases, some on shelf,
But what's the rarest sight of all?
YOUR HUMBLE SERVANT SHOWS HIMSELF.**

Among the exhibits were: a giant's tooth; a curious piece of metal found in the ruins of Troy; the Pope's infallible candle; manna from Canaan; a necklace made of Job's

tears; a leprechaun's foreskin; and a sandal that belonged to Pontius Pilate's wife.

There was no charge to see the museum, but visitors were expected to buy a cup of coffee or a catalogue for twopence. Poor old Salter was evidently not a good businessman. After a few years he declared bankruptcy and the museum closed. The entire contents were auctioned off in 1799.

Mr Crapper's Bottom Slapper

 120 King's Road

MAP: G

Thomas Crapper, sanitary pioneer and inventor – though not, contrary to popular belief, the actual inventor of the flushing toilet (see [here](#)) – was born in Yorkshire in 1836, the son of a sailor. He apparently walked all the way to London to begin an apprenticeship with a plumber and when he had completed his training he set up on his own in 1861 on Robert Street, Chelsea.

Success quickly followed and five years later he took a lease on some larger premises, the Marlboro' Works in nearby Marlborough Road, which he used as his workshop; then in 1907 he opened his first shop here on the King's Road.

Crapper relentlessly promoted sanitary fittings to a somewhat sceptical world and championed the 'water-waste-preventing cistern syphon' in particular. He also invented the idea of the bathroom showroom when he fitted out the Marlboro' Works with large plate-glass windows to show the passing public his wares. But as with so many things, this was too much for Victorian sensibilities; the sight of so many toilet bowls on show caused several ladies to faint.

Crapper registered a number of patents, one of which was for the 'disconnecting trap' which became an essential underground drain fitting. But perhaps the most interesting was his spring-loaded toilet seat, which was designed to flush automatically once the user stood up. Unfortunately, due to a problem with the rubber buffers on the underside

of the seat, the seat would remain down, attached to the toilet bowl, for a few seconds as the user got to his feet. Then the powerful springs would release the seat, which would immediately slap the unfortunate incumbent on the bare bottom.

The device became popularly known as the 'Bottom Slapper' and, unsurprisingly, seems not to have been a commercial success.

Sadly, the word 'crap' is not derived from Thomas Crapper's name, as is so often supposed. Its origins are more likely to be a Middle English combination of the Dutch word *krappen*, meaning to pluck off, cut off or separate, and the Old French *crappe*, meaning waste or rejected matter. It was first used in relation to human waste in 1846, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, in the term 'crapping ken', meaning a privy.

Mr Crapper seems to have approached his business with a sense of humour. All his porcelain urinals carried the tiny logo of a bee. For the bee in Latin is *apis* – a piss!