

Fleet Street in the 1600's

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A small section of the "Agas map" printed in 1633. The full map is at www.mapoflondon.uvic.ca/agas.htm
Note Temple Bar, St. Dunstons-in-the-West jutting well out into Fleet Street, St. Bride Church, and the Fleet River.

The most famous diarist of the seventeenth century was Samuel Pepys but perhaps there were women and less famous men living on Fleet St then who jotted down their experiences. What would they have written about?

The constant building work! The blossoming printing and publishing trade meant offices and workshops filled every available space and spread northwards from Fleet St over what had been open fields at the beginning of the century. The lawyers added to their inns of court. Noblemen built mansions on the south side of the street spreading down to the Thames. Then they had to do it all again after the Great Fire! A new 'classical' Temple Bar replaced the old medieval one and Wren's St Brides must have been a more elegant church to go to than its predecessor. Then there was the new shopping 'mall' in the Strand, just south of Maiden Lane, full of china, fabric from India, lacquer work from Japan, coffee, tea and chocolate. Women were unlikely to visit the coffee houses which sprung up in the middle of the century, but they might have run one.

So much dirt and danger! The Fleet River was an open sewer with dead dogs, butchers offal and human waste, the apprentices often rioted, there was no police force and two prisons were close by. The area south of Fleet St once occupied by the Carmelite priory of the Whitefriars became a place of sanctuary for criminals, outlaws and debtors. It was known as Alsatia as it was just as dangerous and lawless as the war-ravaged region of Alsace. Outbreaks of plague, particularly bad in 1665, meant just walking down the street could bring imminent death. The increasing use of coal rather than wood caused terrible pollution and there was a constant pall of smoke. If you weren't burning in the Great Fire, or choking on the coal fumes, there were the cold winters of the 'little ice age' to contend with. The winter of 1658/9 was the coldest on record - great fun if you were visiting the fairs on the frozen Thames but not so good at home

when all the water froze and it was impossible to get fresh water from the conduit at the bottom of Shoe Lane because that would have frozen too.

Plenty to see on Fleet St! The street joined Westminster and the City and was the main processional route between the two. There were coronation processions and in 1661 the opportunity to buy the first coronation mug, produced for Charles II. Perhaps you could fill it with wine from the conduit which usually ran with water. Criminals also made the journey to execution and in 1606 Guy Fawkes followed this fatal route from the Tower to his death at Westminster. It wouldn't have been a long walk from Fleet St to the Banqueting House in Whitehall to see Charles I beheaded.

The opposing sides in the Civil War made the most of printing and publishing to put forward their arguments. Women got much more involved, especially if they were non-conformist. They organised petitions, wrote letters and marched in the streets.

What about some fun? There were lots of inns and taverns. If you visited the Belle Sauvage, a coaching inn at the bottom of Ludgate Hill, early in the century you might have met Pocahontas and her retinue but in 1684 you could pay a penny there to see a rhinoceros. Perhaps the theatres were more of a draw? There were theatres in what had been the halls of the Blackfriars and Whitefriars priories. They were popular and residents used to complain about all the extra traffic on performance days. A new theatre was added in 1629 - the Salisbury Court Theatre which was replaced after the Great Fire by the Dorset Garden Theatre. You can tread in the footsteps of these seventeenth century women and men if you step into the Old Cheshire Cheese for a drink or a meal and the site of the Salisbury Court Playhouse is marked by a blue plaque on the side of a building in Dorset Rise.



Plaque marking the site of the Salisbury Court Theatre



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Additional notes

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