

Salisbury Square

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Whether there was ever a barber who cut his clients' throats from ear to ear and had their flesh turned into Mrs Lovett's delicious meat pies is highly doubtful. But what is undisputed, is that Sweeney Todd, the demon barber of Fleet Street, appeared as a character for the first time in 'The String of Pearls,' published in 1846 by Edward Lloyd Ltd, of 12 Salisbury Square, just off Fleet Street.

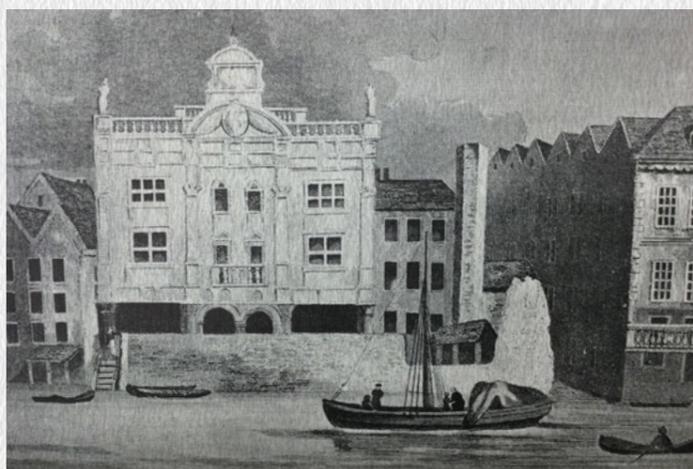
While the middle-classes read serialised Dickens, costing 6d per month, what became known as 'Salisbury Square fiction' appeared weekly and cost just one penny. The stories that streamed out of 12 Salisbury Square fed a demand from the urban masses for entertainment, indicating literacy levels were rising amongst the working-classes decades before the 1870 Education Act.

The most popular Salisbury Square serials, otherwise known as 'Penny Bloods', were 'String of Pearls' and 'Varney the Vampire'. Favoured by females were 'Ela the Outcast' and 'Ada the Betrayed.' Their addictive page-turning quality delivered escapism from lives of drudgery, making them especially popular with maids – although less so with their employers, who would discover their servants reading rather than cooking or cleaning.

Situated to the south of Fleet Street, between St Brides Church and Whitefriars Street, Salisbury Square already had a long connection with entertainment. From 1671 to 1709, on the south side of the Square, stood the Dorset Garden theatre, known for its spectacular productions including operatic adaptations of Macbeth (1673) and the Tempest (1674). Also known as the Duke's Theatre it was famous for its, large casts, dancing, instrumental and vocal music, moving scenery, and flying actors and objects.



Close-up of Robert Waithman Obelisk



The river frontage of the Dorset Garden Theatre

And 12 Salisbury Square itself already had a literary history. 'Pamela,' considered one of the first English novels, was published there in 1740. Interviewed on the premises in 1887 Edward Lloyd, by this time a very wealthy newspaper man, told journalist Joseph Hatton "This was Richardson's printing-office; in this room he wrote 'Pamela,' and here Oliver Goldsmith acted as his reader. I can show you Richardson's lease of these very premises."

By 1887 Salisbury Square had also become famous for Lloyd's mass circulation newspapers.

"Mr Lloyd's freeholds and leaseholds", continues Hatton in Harper's Magazine, "are a curious mixture of properties, extending into Whitefriars, under streets and over streets, and they are all devoted to the mechanical requirements of Lloyd's Newspaper and The Daily Chronicle."

12 Salisbury Square was destroyed on the night of 30 January 1940 during the raid on London when all but the tower of Wren's St Bride's was razed to the ground.

After the war the Square became a mixture of old and new. Chronicle House, 72-78 Fleet Street, which backed on to the north side of Salisbury Square, survived the bombing raid. Hanging Sword Alley, with its newsprint warehouses on the square's west side, also survived the 1940 air raid – but were subsequently demolished and replaced in 1970 with Fleetbank House.

Then in 2021 the bulldozers rolled in and completely flattened what still remained of Salisbury Square, much to the distress of heritage experts. Save Britain's Heritage wanted Number one Salisbury Square preserved, describing it as "a fine, five storey early Georgian town house carefully rebuilt in 1962 following war damage that illustrates the type of buildings that once surrounded Salisbury Square in the 18th and 19th centuries."

The only remnant from previous centuries now is an obelisk to Robert Waithman (1764-1833), Mayor of London 1823-24. Describing Waithman as a "Friend of Liberty in Evil Times" the obelisk has been put into storage. The developers promise it will be reinstated as part of the new Salisbury Square 'Justice Quarter.'



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Additional notes

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Further Reading:

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