

Bridewell Palace

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*Hans Holbein the Younger's painting
'the Ambassadors'*



*1553 Bridewell Palace and
the Fleet River*



*A replica of Bridewell Palace's
Gatehouse on 14 New Bridge Street*

In the past 500 years, Bridewell Palace has been many things: a royal residence, a prison, a school, a hospital. Now, all that remains of it is a replica gatehouse nestled on New Bridge Street.

Bridewell Palace became a royal residence in 1515 when Henry VIII's advisor, Cardinal Wolsey, gifted it to him. It had been built in 1510 between Fleet Street and the Thames for £39,000 – about £27 million in today's money – and was named for the patron saint of the nearby St Bride's Church and for the site of an ancient holy Spring said to lie under the surface.

The layout of the palace centred on a processional staircase that connected two brick courtyards – one being the inner sanctum of the Royal residence. Processional staircases became a favourite of Henry VIII over the course of his reign and were replicated in later palaces such as Hampton Court. These interlocking courtyards were complemented by kitchen and formal gardens along the perimeter of the palace.

While the palace was a favourite of Henry's throughout the 1520s, in 1529 it became the site of intrigue with 'The King's Great Matter': Catherine of Aragon could no longer bear children, and Henry had no male heirs. In 1529, Henry sought permission from the Pope to annul his marriage with Catherine of Aragon and instead marry Anne Boleyn, which Catherine strongly opposed. A Papal legate was dispatched by Pope Clement VII to adjudicate on the matter. These clergymen were welcomed to Bridewell Palace by King Henry and Queen Catherine, both of whom wished to persuade the representatives to their sides. With the Legatine Court convened at Bridewell,

Queen Catherine pleaded with her husband: 'Sir, I beseech you for all the loves that hath been between us, and for the love of God, let me have justice and right, take of me some pity and compassion ...'. Catherine did not succeed, as history tells us. Following his marriage to Anne Boleyn, Cardinal Wolsey fell out of favour, and King Henry lost interest in his gift of Bridewell Palace.

For a time, Bridewell Palace became the residency of the French Ambassadors, and the site of Hans Holbein the Younger's famous painting 'the Ambassadors', lauded by art historians to be "one of the most staggeringly impressive portraits in Renaissance art." However, the Palace fell into disuse and disrepair until the reign of Edward VI.

When Edward VI licensed part of Bridewell Palace to the City of London in 1553, the Palace became a prison. Although much of it was burned down in the Great Fire of 1666, Bridewell prison became infamous in the next two centuries for housing the 'disorderly' fraudsters, prostitutes, and beggars of London. Most famous among those incarcerated was e 'Madam' Cresswell. Upon her death, all that was said of her was "she was born well, lived well and died well, for she was born with the name of Cresswell, lived at Clerkenwell, and died in Bridewell". Cresswell and others were the inmates of the first prison ever to have medical staff on-site, which led to the remaining building of Bridewell becoming a hospital in the 1800s while continuing to house prisoners. As the British Empire grew, so too did companies in the City. So, in 1921 Lever Bros acquired the remaining land for their offices, which later merged with others to form Unilever in 1930, the first multinational company, with offices that were once a palace for kings.



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Additional notes

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Sources: Copperplate map of Bridewell, c. 1553 (Source Ann Saunders and John Schofield (eds), *Tudor London: a map and a view* (2001)).

Further reading:

Lives, 1690-1800 (www.londonlives.org, version 1.1, 05 August 2019).

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