Commuting through the Renaissance

Professor Sue Wiseman points out the everyday clues to our city’s Renaissance history

Below: The North Prospect of London taken from the Bowling Green at Holborn. By Thomas Bowles, c. 1740. New River Head, centre-left, Upper Pond in foreground (London Metropolitan Archives, City of London (COLLAGE 27242))

Dead London have a Renaissance, and how can we tell? Surprisingly, some of the evidence for answering this question is available to Londoners even on our way to work. There is quite a lot of seventeenth-century London around us.

Those who travel from the west up Whitehall pass through the palace of Henry VIII, abolished after him by Elizabeth I, James VI and I, Charles I and the later Stuarts. It is possible to roughly map the area covered by that palace using a map from the period known as the Agas map in combination with physical markers. The Banqueting House on Whitehall was built to house the celebrations, receptions of ambassadors and plays that were an important part of the Renaissance monarch’s magnificence. The first banqueting house was built by Henry VIII, and Elizabeth I followed up with a series of temporary structures including one ‘made of great masts’, with painted canvas walls – cheap and cheerful but also chilly. When James VI and I arrived from Edinburgh, he restarted the building project in the present location and, after a fire in 1636, the structure we have today was erected on the south-west of the palace area. The building was conceived by Inigo Jones, bringing his interests in current Italian architecture, and completed in 1638, well over budget at £4,940. Once Charles I had commissioned, shipped and installed a huge ceiling painting by Rubens’ masques were again banished to a wooden structure lest the torches damage or even ignite Rubens’ rich vision of the union of the Scottish and English crowns. However, another kind of conflagration consumed Charles’ government. Indeed, Rubens’ ceiling must have been among his last sights on earth, for on 30 January 1649 he was led out of a window in his beloved banqueting house to be beheaded on a wooden scaffold. It is said that the window through which he went is blocked up.

Anyone who travels by bus down Upper Street will pass a statue of Hugh Myddleton – the architect of the New River. London’s massive expansion in the later sixteenth century had left the water supply in a parlous and unhealthy condition. Throughout the 1590s the City explored the possibility of digging a canal to the springs of Hertfordshire and work was started in 1604 by Edward Colehurst. When Colehurst ran into financial trouble, Hugh Myddleton used his position as a goldsmith, merchant and powerbroker in the City to finish the job – and take the credit. The wood-lined New River is a delicate feat of engineering, which still brings water from Hertfordshire to London. It is, indeed, a river not a canal, using a gradient to take the credit. The wood-lined New River is a delicate feat of engineering, which still brings water from Hertfordshire to London. It is, indeed, a river not a canal, using a gradient to bring water into London. The New River was declared open by the Lord Mayor with a Sagum written by Thomas Middleton (no relation) celebrating the arrival of London’s newly clean water. The river ended at the top of Rosebery Avenue, where street names, waterworks and a late seventeenth-century room still mark its terminus. The best way to see the New River today is to take the train to Broxbourne and walk its banks and those of the River Lea. Chums, in south London, is also worth a trip to look at the Lumley tombs and explore the site of Henry VIII’s magnificent palace of Nonsuch. On certain days you can visit the Lumley tombs in a chapel in the churchyard of St Dunstan’s. In the 1590s Lord John Lumley, a Roman Catholic peer who had also held Nonsuch Palace, set aside the chapel for himself and his wife. The three tombs contain Lord John himself, his first wife, the renownedly learned writer and translator, and his second wife, Elizabeth, who outlived him.

Finally, the traveller from the east moves along the path of Roman routes to and through London. The Apothecaries’ Hall is just south of St Paul’s, in the middle of the Blackfriars complex where they located in 1667 when James VI and I finally granted them guild status. Although the original hall was destroyed in the Great Fire of 1666, these premises are perhaps the closest thing London has to an original guildhall, described by London’s chronicler John Strype as having “a fair pair of Gates” and a courtyard “handsomely paved with broad Stones”. As you stand in the courtyard of the apothecaries, somewhere close by was the hall in which plays were staged in its two different theatres. Once we realise how close together the stage and the potions were, Blackfriars plays like The Knight of the Burning Pestle, with its many jokes about grocers and apothecaries (just think about the title), seem to have nearly concrete implications. Together, text and buildings allow us to think again about the spaces of the past.

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