

London Journeys from the BBC: Crowd One

The crowd has given London energy and power. The first super city in the world, London has long been used to crowds: crowded streets, crowded markets, crowded theatres and crowded places of execution.

Some of the most over-crowded slums in London used to be in this area, the parish of St Giles. The crumbling stinking alleyways were home to beggars, the poor and the desperate, and the whole area was filled with an atmosphere of poisoned menace.

French visitor Flora Tristan, writing in 1840, confirmed the reputation of St Giles:

'In St Giles one feels asphyxiated by the stench; there is no air to breathe, nor daylight to find one's way... Imagine men, women and children, all barefooted, ploughing through the nasty, filthy mire... old people huddling for warmth in rotten straw, young men dressed in tatters... everyone sleeps in the one room, father, mother, sons, daughters and friends, like so many animals.'

On his visit to London in 1860, the Russian writer Leo Tolstoy echoed horror at the sight of London's poor:

'When I see these dirty tattered children, with their bright eyes and angels' faces, I am filled with apprehension as if I were seeing drowning people. How to save them? Which to save first? That which is drowning is that which is most valuable, the spiritual element in these children.'

This church was a milestone on the dreadful procession from Newgate prison to the East to the gallows of Tyburn, now called Marble Arch to the West. Here, in the place known as Resurrection Gate, the condemned would pause to take a last drink of ale before entry into the next world.

Consider the scene as condemned prisoners made their way through the jeering, jostling, blood-thirsty mass of humanity, as an anonymous account from 1745 suggests:

'At last, out set the criminals, and with them a torrent of mob bursting through the gate, like a west-country barge with a flash of Thames water. Thousands were pressing to mind the looks of them... and here you see young villains... tear the clothes off their backs by squeezing and creeping through the legs of men and horses to shake hands with them; and not to lose before so much company the reputation there is, in having had so valuable an acquaintance. All the way from Newgate to Tyburn, is one continued fair... for whores and rogues of the meaner sort.'

Endell Street takes you into the area known as Covent Garden, famed throughout London's history as a busy, fashionable and lively part of town.

Samuel Johnson, author, critic and lexicographer, was a regular visitor to this area. He noted:

‘When a man is tired of London, he is tired of life; for there is in London all that life can afford!’

The name Covent Garden was inspired by St Peter’s Convent, part of Westminster Abbey, which used to own the land here. A kitchen garden and small farm was established to supply produce to the Abbey. The Long Acre stood beside it.

Following the dissolution of the monasteries the Convent Garden was given to the Earl of Bedford by Henry VIII and Inigo Jones was recruited to design a piazza there. In 1649 a fruit and vegetable market was established, which lasted until the 1970s.

Markets and shops have long been a feature of Covent Garden, as Charles Dickens noted in his description of the nearby Seven Dials:

‘Shops for the purchase of rags, bones, old iron, and kitchen-stuff, vie in cleanliness with the bird-fanciers and rabbit-dealers... Brokers’ shops, which would seem to have been established by humane individuals, as refuges for destitute boys, interspersed with announcements of day-schools, penny theatres, petition-writers, mangles, and music for balls or routs, complete the ‘still life’ of the subject; and dirty men, filthy women, squalid children, fluttering shuttlecocks, noisy battledores, reeking pipes, bad fruit, more than doubtful oysters, attenuated cats, depressed dogs, and anatomical fowls, are its cheerful accompaniments... ‘

Long Acre has always been a busy thoroughfare and once hosted a variety of small industries, employing skilled workers - from coach builders, tanners and metalworkers to upholsterers and furniture makers. Thomas Chippendale’s company was among them.

Charles Dickens gives a flavour of this historic commercial scene in his novel ‘Little Dorrit’, but he can’t deny the poverty that existed, side by side, with the riches on offer:

‘Courtly ideas of Covent Garden, as a place with famous coffee-houses, where gentlemen wearing gold-laced coats and swords had quarrelled and fought duels; costly ideas of Covent Garden, as a place where there were flowers in winter at guineas a-piece, pine-apples at guineas a pound, and peas at guineas a pint; picturesque ideas of Covent Garden, as a place where there was a mighty theatre, showing wonderful and beautiful sights to richly-dressed ladies and gentlemen, and which was for ever far beyond the reach of poor Fanny or poor uncle; desolate ideas of Covent Garden, as having all those arches in it, where the miserable children in rags among whom she had just now passed, like young rats, slunk and hid, fed on offal, huddled together for warmth, and were hunted about... teeming ideas of Covent Garden, as a

place of past and present mystery, romance, abundance, want, beauty, ugliness, fair country gardens, and foul street gutters; all confused together...'

Take another look up and down Long Acre and imagine that this then became the hub of mass transport. Car makers, such as British Mercedes, Daimler and Fiat have all occupied this street.

In nearby Soho, the future in mass entertainment was born when John Logie Baird projected the world's first TV picture.

This is home to London's premier magistrate court, handling such famous cases as the committal of the notorious murderer, Dr Crippen.

And near here was the home of the Bow Street Runners, the first professional police force in the world. They were founded by the novelist and Chief Magistrate Henry Fielding in frustration at the powerful criminal street gangs running wild in the streets of London.

The old system involved a few parish constables chosen by lot, similar to a jury today. They were unpaid and served only for a year. Those chosen often paid substitutes, who could be just as corrupt as the criminals, so Henry Fielding introduced paid constables in the early 1750s. All carried tipstaves – a staff with a metal tip carried as a badge of officialdom.

When Henry's health failed some years later, his brother John Fielding took over. Despite being blind in a world without braille or tapes, John was knighted for his success in bringing London's criminals to justice. He interviewed many suspects in person, and could reputedly name some 3,000 criminals just by hearing their voices.

Further down on the right, you will be able to see the Royal Opera House building, recently restored, with the Floral Hall beyond it.

Theatre-going crowds are less rowdy now but in the past, riots and fighting often brought down the house. When David Garrick changed the programme at the nearby Drury Lane Theatre in the 1700s - now called the Drury Lane Theatre Royal. - Casanova witnessed the audience's reaction:

'In less than an hour the theatre was gutted, till nothing but the bare walls were left. After this destruction, which went on without any authority interposing, the mad populace rushed to the taverns to consume gin and beer. In a fortnight the theatre was refitted and the piece announced again, and when Garrick appeared before the curtain to implore the indulgence of the house, a voice from the pit shouted, "On your knees". A thousand voices took up the cry "On your knees", and the English Roscius was obliged to kneel down and beg forgiveness. Then came a thunder of applause, and everything was over. Such are the English, and above all, the Londoners.'

Londoners love the city's drama – and if none is to be had, the London crowd are happy to create their own.