

London Journeys from the BBC: Crowd Two

Smithfield stands on the site of the annual Bartholomew Fair – whose vast size, endless thieving and drunken excesses put it beyond the control of the authorities. It was finally stopped in 1855 to prim Victorian Londoner's relief. Over half a mile long, the present meat market was established in 1868 to help feed the London mass's insatiable appetite for meat. This great hunger prompted Casanova to remark in the 1700s that Englishmen were entirely carnivorous and laughed at his wish for soup, dismissing it as fit only for invalids.

Dickens' 'Oliver Twist' conjures images of the bloody Smithfield market in Victorian times:

'It was market morning. The ground was covered, nearly ankle deep, with filth and mire; a thick stream, perpetually rising from the reeking bodies of the cattle and mingling with the fog... the crowding, pushing, driving, beating, whooping and yelling; the hideous and discordant din that resounded from every corner of the market; and the unwashed, unshaven, squalid and dirty figures constantly running to and fro, and bursting in and out of the throng; rendered it a stunning and bewildering scene, which quite confounded the senses.'

St Bartholomew's Hospital is affectionately known as 'Bart's'. This dates from the year 1123 and remains a hospital today. The founder, a man called Rahere, was a favourite courtier of King Henry the First. Thought to be a lover of the good life, Rahere changed his ways after he nearly died from malaria on a pilgrimage, and health became his priority.

Take a look at the walls of Bart's, where you will see two plaques. The closer brown plaque is dedicated to the memory of hundreds of Protestant Martyrs, burnt to death on this site during the reign of the Catholic Queen Mary Tudor. She became known as 'Bloody Mary'. In 1558, she died childless to be succeeded by her Protestant half sister, Elizabeth.

The next plaque commemorates Sir William Wallace, the Scottish patriot, who was executed near this spot in 1305. His grisly death from hanging, drawing and quartering was portrayed in the popular film 'Braveheart'.

Wat Tyler brought rebels to this area with the 'Peasants Revolt' in 1381. The peasants and their leader came to negotiate with the young king Richard the Second. Tyler made the mistake of touching the king's bridle, for which the Lord Mayor of London stabbed him. While recovering in Bart's, Tyler was dragged out and beheaded by knights loyal to the king. The king, only 14 years old, rode into the midst of the furious crowd and stunned them into obedience by proclaiming, 'You have no captain but me.' Thanks to the young king's confidence, London was saved from the mob's anger.

At the first floor level is the Golden Boy statue, which marks the point where the Great Fire of London was finally stopped after three days of terrible destruction in 1666.

Because the fire spread from 'Pudding Lane' to 'Pie Corner', the surviving London crowd felt that they had been punished for greed. The Golden Boy, who hugs his belly, symbolises the sin of gluttony. He stands as a warning to future generations.

The prisoners would be led through this tunnel to receive their Last Sacrament in the church. It is also said that the condemned awaiting execution would be awoken at midnight by the sound of a nightwatchman, swinging his handbell and solemnly intoning:

'All you that in the condemned hold do lie, prepare you for tomorrow you shall die; Watch all and pray, the hour is drawing near That you before the Almighty must appear; examine well yourselves, in time repent, That you may not to eternal flames be sent: and when St Sepulchre's bell tomorrow tolls, The Lord above have mercy on your souls. Past twelve o'clock!'

Before the year 1783, Tyburn, now called Marble Arch, was used for execution. The route to the gallows at Tyburn, passed around Smithfield and then along Holborn. After 1783, the prisoners were executed in the shadow of the prison walls, within sight of this church.

This is now the Central Criminal Court, but was once the site of the terrible Newgate Jail, described as the 'prototype of hell' by Henry Fielding, novelist and magistrate.

Daniel Defoe, *who was imprisoned there himself*, revisits the experience in his novel 'Moll Flanders':

'It was ... impossible to describe the terror of my mind, when I was first brought in, and when I looked round upon all the horrors of that dismal place ... the hellish noise, the roaring, swearing and clamour, the stench and nastiness, and all the dreadful afflicting things that I saw there, joined to make the place seem an emblem of hell itself, and a kind of an entrance into it.'

Charles Dickens describes Newgate in several of his novels, This extract is taken from 'Nicholas Nickleby':

'There, at the very core of London, in the heart of its business and animation, in the midst of a whirl of noise and motion: stemming as it were the giant currents of life that flow ceaselessly on from different quarters, and meet beneath its walls: stands Newgate.'

The interior of Newgate was grim. Extracts from Dickens' 'The Tale of Two Cities' and 'Sketches by Boz' paint the scene:

'The gaol was a vile place, in which most kinds of debauchery and villainy were practised, and where dire diseases were bred... the Old Bailey was famous as a kind of deadly Inn-yard, from which pale travellers set out continually, in carts and coaches, on a violent passage into another world: traversing some two miles and a half of public street and road.'

'How much awful it is to reflect on this near vicinity to the dying – to men in full health and vigour, in the flower of youth or the prime of life, with all their faculties and perceptions as acute and perfect as your own; but dying, nevertheless. Dying as surely – with the hand of death imprinted on them as indelibly - as if mortal disease had wasted their frames to shadows, and corruption had already had begun.'

Newgate Prison was hated by the London crowds but only once did they have the chance to fully express their hatred. During the Gordon Riots in 1780, a mob of 50,000 went wild across the city. After sating their hatred of Catholics, who had been subject to persecution, discrimination and bigotry since the sixteenth century, the crowd turned their attention to authoritarian institutions, from Newgate prison to the Bank of England.

James Boswell gave an eye-witness account of the riots in his famous biography 'Life of Johnson':

'On Wednesday I walked with Dr Scott to look at Newgate, and found it in ruins with the fire yet glowing. As I went by, the Protestants were plundering the Sessions-House at the Old Bailey. There were not, I believe, a hundred; but they did their work at leisure, in full security, without sentinels, without trepidation, as men lawfully employed, in full day. Such is the cowardice of the commercial place.'

While the crowd gives London energy and power, this mass of people can also destroy as riots throughout London's history have shown.