

PART ONE

An **OVERVIEW** *of* **LONDON**

LONDON IS ONE OF THE WORLD'S BEST CITIES and has been for centuries, give or take an outburst or two of social and economic deprivations, class oppression, maniacal monarchies, puritan repressions, and worse. This capital city has been through invasion, warfare, famine, plague, and rebellion, but age has yet to wither London or custom to stale her infinite variety. Nor is it completely pretentious to parrot a line from Shakespeare to praise this city—it used to be his town, too.

As coolly modern and urbane as London is now, there is something profoundly mysterious and majestic about this 21st-century city when you tune out the neon and push away the traffic to grasp the deeper dimensions of its fascinating and long life. A bit of the history of this town on the Thames is just as useful for the discerning visitor as a street map. So here we go.

The **LONG LIFE** *of* *an* **ANCIENT CITY**

INITIALLY, LONDON'S HISTORY IS ONE OF INVASION and conquest, perhaps because the city is situated on the banks of a wide river cutting through a large island; its later history, owing to England's system of monarchy, is one of bloody factionalism and revolving persecutions. During the empire's formative years, British blood was shed on foreign soil as England's sovereignty was propped up by the exploitation of far-off continents and by the labor of underpaid, often underage workers in London.

But through it all, the story of London has been intertwined with the history of commerce: this port city has beckoned to artisans, sailors, farmers, prostitutes, and wheelers and dealers of all shades of corruption for two millennia. London shows no signs of losing its mojo in the third millennium.

WHEN ROME RULED LONDINIUM

JULIUS CAESAR'S FAMOUS REMARK about how Britons made terrible slaves was based both in fact and in no small measure of sour grapes: in 55 BC and 56 BC, he tried to subdue England twice and failed. In AD 43, the Romans again sent an army to conquer the island. This time they built a bridge over the Thames at the narrowest crossing, near the present London Bridge. Soon, this small Roman outpost, called Londinium, grew into a thriving port of commerce, as luxury goods from all over the Roman Empire arrived and were exchanged for corn, iron, and—Julius Caesar notwithstanding—slaves.

The Roman historian Tacitus wrote that Londinium was “famed for commerce and crowded with merchants,” a description that would remain accurate for the next 2,000 years (and will doubtless continue to be). Roadways, the most ubiquitous and long-lasting feature of Roman rule, soon headed in every direction from this trading post and were well traveled by Romans and Britons in search of adventure and wealth. After a period of Pax Romana (a “peace” imposed martially by Rome on its dominions), foreign rule became increasingly unbearable to the local tribes. Queen Boudicca (also spelled Boadicea) of the Iceni tribe was at the head of a violent revolt, leading hordes of warriors to invade Londinium, where they massacred everyone in sight and burned the Roman fortress to the ground. The revolution was short-lived, however, and the rebels were mercilessly repaid with extreme interest. Londinium was rebuilt with an encircling wall, encompassing the present-day City and Barbican area. A piece of the wall is preserved near the Museum of London, and a heart-stirring statue of the ferocious Boudicca stands near Westminster Bridge.

By AD 410, the sun had dipped below the horizon on the once-unbeatable Roman Empire. Troops withdrew gradually, leaving behind the sprouts of Rome's newly adopted Christian faith. London then dwindled into a ghost town. When new invaders from the north arrived, they superstitiously stayed away from the Roman ruins, which were soon buried under the silt of the river and would lie undiscovered until the end of World War II.

THE SAXONS' LUNDENWIC

IN THE FIFTH CENTURY, immigration of Saxon tribes from the north of Europe to the southeast of England led to an inevitable move toward the well-situated former Londinium, abandoned on the Thames. By the late 400s, London slowly shook off its Roman ashes and began to reestablish itself as a trading post, now known as Lundenwic. After starting his reign as the leader of a pagan society, King Ethelbert converted to Christianity and built the first church of St. Paul on roughly the same site where today's edifice stands. The Saxon kings spent most of the next five centuries fighting Viking invaders and fortifying their kingdom and its capital at Winchester, in the West Country. London

has King Alfred to thank for rebuilding it after Danish invaders left it in ruins, as well as for lighting a few other candles in those dark ages.

The tenth century saw a new prosperity as neighborhoods and parishes sprang up on the banks of the Thames. In the 11th century, the Danes finally won the day, and England was forced to kneel to its king, Canute. He put London on the map as the capital of the kingdom, and by 1042, when Edward the Confessor took the scepter, London was poised on the brink of a great architectural leap forward. Westminster Abbey and the Palace at Westminster gave the raucous commercial port a dignity that was soon complemented by the White Tower, the tallest building at the Tower of London.

WILLIAM THE CONQUEROR

IN 1066, AT THE BATTLE OF HASTINGS, a Norman army led by William vanquished the Saxon troops and with that victory signaled a new dawn for London. William decided to hold his coronation at Westminster Abbey, where virtually every British monarch since has been crowned. The king recognized that London was perfectly placed to be a rich capital, and he built his White Tower next to the river, not just for the strategic value but also to show the inhabitants of this headstrong city who was in charge. However, William was also a smart politician who granted freedoms to the Saxon-dominated church and local governors, ensuring a pleasant and profitable back-scratching all around.

London grew rich under the watchful eye of the kings who followed, who knew that the key to their power lay in the wealth and goodwill of London's merchants and churchmen. In 1180, William Fitzstephen, in the preface to his *Life of Thomas à Becket*, sang high praises of London: "It is blessed by a wholesome climate. . . . in the strength of its fortifications, in the nature of its site, the repute of its citizens, the honour of its matrons; happy in its sports, prolific in noble men . . . I can think of no other city with customs more admirable. . . . The only plagues of London are the immoderate drinking of fools and the frequency of fires."

A VIBRANT MEDIEVAL PORT

LONDON IN THE MIDDLE AGES was a crazy salad of streets, alleys, markets, outdoor brothels, bear-baiting pits, pubs, and theaters. The vibrancy of the streets was matched in energy by the jostling for power among the court, the burgesses, and the church. In 1215, the Magna Carta, a revolutionary document of the time that attempted to limit the excesses and power of the king and establish personal rights and political freedom for the nobility, was signed by King John, who was forced to do so by rebellious barons and the newly created lord mayor of London. Soon Parliament and the House of Commons were created, and England became a place of liberty and justice for at least a few more than before. Though the Magna Carta was

designed to free the aristocracy from the despotism of a monarch, it also contained the fateful word *freemen*, and so signaled at least theoretical rights for the common people.

The port was thriving. Houses and warehouses lined the riverbanks, and the power of the guilds and merchants grew apace. But London's position as one of the world's great ports—crowded with thousands of people living in appalling sanitary conditions—led to the first outbreak of bubonic plague. The Black Death of 1348 traveled across the English Channel from the European continent, which was already reeling from the dread disease. Nearly half of London's population succumbed to the plague, infected by rats that multiplied in the filthy streets and fetid sewers. The debacle, with its attendant economic disaster, led to an egregiously ill-advised poll tax imposed in 1381 by a financially strapped court—a shilling a person, regardless of income or situation. The Peasants' Revolt, led by Jack Straw and Wat Tyler, put every future monarch on notice that Londoners had a breaking point that should be studiously avoided. After a riotous spree of looting, burning, and murder, the rebels were overcome, and a young King Richard II restored order, but the point was well taken: the poll tax was quietly dropped.

A new intellectual age dawned around this time. In the 1390s, Geoffrey Chaucer wrote *The Canterbury Tales*, and in 1476 William Caxton set up his printing press at Westminster. His apprentice, the aptly named Wynkyn de Worde, took over when Caxton died in 1491 and relocated the press to Fleet Street in 1500, turning the making of books into a real business, publishing volumes on a wide variety of subjects and even setting up a bookstore in St. Paul's. At the same time, London's monasteries became centers for teaching and learning, and literacy began creeping into the merchant and upper classes, setting the scene for the Renaissance culture of the Tudor era.

TUDOR LONDON

THE WAR OF THE ROSES BETWEEN the fractious factions of the House of Plantagenet—the York and Lancaster branches—provided William Shakespeare with a superabundance of material for his tragedies. As he wrote in *Richard III*, “England hath long been mad, and scarred herself; / The brother blindly shed the brother's blood, The father rashly slaughtered his own son, / The son, compelled, been butcher to the sire: / All this divided York and Lancaster. . . .”

The bloody dynastic feud for the throne had relatively little effect on the daily lives of Londoners scrambling for a living. But when Richard III allegedly smothered his two young nephews, the rightful heirs to the throne, in the Tower of London, the citizenry strenuously disapproved, and few regretted the end of Richard's reign. Enter the Tudor dynasty, whose heirs were at least as ruthless when it came to insulting and disposing of relatives as any of the previous Plantagenets had been.

Henry VIII married his elder brother Arthur's widow, Catherine of Aragon, to keep the peace with Spain. After 20 years of marriage and one daughter, Mary, Henry fell in love with Anne Boleyn and was spurred by his emotions to make the momentous decision that he must marry again in order to have a male heir. He petitioned the Catholic Church in Rome for an annulment, but for all his diplomatic wiles, he was refused absolutely. Not one to take no for an answer, and a man who willingly threw out both baby and bathtub with the bathwater, Henry broke with the Vatican and created the Church of England, installing himself as *de facto* Pope. This shocking maneuver kicked off a complicated crisis of faith and politics, one in which old supporters were forced to choose between their Catholicism and their king. All too many were burned or beheaded as heretics.

When his queen failed to produce the desired male heir (although her one child, Elizabeth, was to become one of the most powerful monarchs of England), Henry trumped up charges of adultery and incest against Anne Boleyn, and she was executed at the Tower of London, where her unquiet ghost apparently makes the rounds nightly. The king then embarked on a serial marital spree that left in its wake a total of six wives—as the nursery rhyme goes, “two beheaded, two divorced, one died, and one survived.”

One of the most long-reaching secular expressions of this religious overhaul was in the dissolution of the monasteries, as Henry rather gleefully took for the crown all the Catholic Church's property in England—cathedrals, churches, priories, convents, and monasteries. Huge numbers of beautiful Gothic and medieval buildings were put to fire and other depredations, and the king redistributed the land among the new loyal-to-Henry aristocracy, creating new streets, houses, and courtyards where there had once been wealthy Catholic establishments. Resistant nuns and clergy were hung, drawn, and quartered; the army of crippled, diseased, and homeless who had been supported by the charity of the churches was thrown upon its own resources, and the streets of London resounded with the cries of their misery.

After Henry VIII died, syphilitic and obese, the sickly child-king Edward VI took the throne; his six-year reign, cut short by his death from consumption, amounted to little more than a vicious power struggle among his courtiers. After “Bloody” Mary, Henry's first daughter, ascended the throne, she imprisoned her half-sister, Elizabeth, in the Tower of London to prevent any uprisings against her iron-fisted reign. Under the staunchly (some would say fanatically) Catholic Mary, it was the Protestants' turn to have their property seized and be hung or burned alive. The daily spectacle of burning heretics at the marketplace of Smithfields finally disgusted even Londoners accustomed to gruesome public punishments.

In another turn of the dynasty, Elizabeth returned England to its still-unsteady Protestant base, forestalling any Catholic overthrow by

having her cousin, Mary, Queen of Scots, executed at Fotheringay Castle in Northamptonshire in 1587. (Mary's son, King James I, ordered her body exhumed in 1612 and reinterred at Westminster Abbey, producing the grim irony of two rival queens resting for eternity within a few feet of one another.)

THE ELIZABETHAN FLOWERING OF LONDON

WHAT WERE THE GOOD CITIZENS of London doing while all the royal-kin-killing kerfuffle and musical thrones were being played out? Well, while the aristocrats built over-the-top estates from the remains of the monasteries and Hyde Park became a happy hunting ground for King Henry VIII, the ordinary Londoner went about the usual daily rounds of earning and eating, fornicating and frolicking, marrying and burying. In 1586, William Shakespeare arrived in London, joining Ben Jonson, Christopher Marlowe, John Donne, and others of the day's glitterati in an extraordinary flowering of English letters.

The city now had a population of 200,000 people, up from 50,000 in the 1300s, and more arrived every day. The great era of exploration was under way as the English plied the oceans in search of riches, returning with sugar, spice, coffee, and tobacco. Sir Thomas Gresham started the Royal Exchange from its humble beginnings as a coffeehouse and made London the world's most important financial center, a position it maintained into the early 20th century. Even more important was the establishment of the printing press.

Although Queen Elizabeth could be as dangerous a friend (and relative) as she was a foe, she was devoted to the welfare of her kingdom and understood that her greatest power lay in the love her subjects had for her—she had an instinctive gift for almost-modern public relations. Perhaps the greatest gift she gave the nation was her much-vaunted virginity: by not marrying a foreign prince, she kept England solidly English for 45 prosperous years (and, not coincidentally, kept for herself the power that she otherwise would have had to cede to any husband). By the end of her long reign, the memories of those ugly battles of succession had faded, but more cataclysms lay ahead for the monarchy and for London.

ROUNDHEADS AND RESTORATION

THE GUNPOWDER PLOT OF 1605, in which a group of Catholic conspirators, including the celebrated Guy Fawkes, was thwarted in a plan to blow up King James I (Mary, Queen of Scots's son), his ministers, and Parliament at the Palace of Westminster, rather appropriately opened London's apocalyptic 17th century. King James died in 1625, leaving on the throne a backward and vain son, Charles I.

Although at this time London was the wealthiest city in the world, Charles I simply could not leave well enough alone. He insisted on the divine right of kings, a philosophy that was anathema to the Parliament and businessmen of London, and a civil war was waged over the principle.

The monarchist Cavaliers were defeated by the Puritan Roundheads, and Charles I was beheaded outside his beloved Banqueting Hall, which had been designed by Inigo Jones. It's the only part of the massive Palace of Westminster that remains intact, and the ceiling painting by Rubens gives you a hint of the megalomania that led to Charles I's downfall: the Stuart dynasty is depicted as sitting at the right hand of God, and glorified beyond all recognition is the short, awkward king who managed to lose his throne and his head. Although the majority of London had been on the side of the antiroyalist Commonwealth, 18 years of dour Puritanism under Oliver Cromwell's rule, during which all fun was canceled, left the city gasping for a breath of fresh air. The diarist John Evelyn wrote at Cromwell's death that "it was the joyfulest funeral I ever saw, for there were none that cried but dogs."

In 1661, London warmly welcomed the exiled Charles II back from France, "shouting with inexpressible joy" and watching undismayed when Charles ordered the three-year-old corpses of Cromwell and two cronies exhumed for the dubious purpose of hanging and beheading them publicly for the murder of his father. (Perhaps the citizens thought it fitting punishment for the closing of theaters, brothels, and gambling houses.)

1660S: PLAGUE AND FIRE

CHARLES II BARELY HAD TIME TO ADJUST his crown when disaster struck. In early 1665, the first cases of a new outbreak of bubonic plague were seen in London. Samuel Pepys, the great diarist, first heard of the contagion in April, writing, "Great fear of the sickness here in the city, it being said that two or three houses are already shut up. God preserve us." The hot summer saw the outbreak burst into an epidemic, with affected houses painted with red crosses and shut up with a guard outside—people trapped inside died either of the plague or starvation. By September, red crosses bloomed everywhere, and the rattle of the death cart was heard in the streets with its mournful accompaniment, "Bring out your dead!"—a wretched parody of the cries of the apple- and mussel-mongers that had been silenced by the calamity. On September 7, 1665, John Evelyn wrote, "I went all along the city and suburbs from Kent Street to St. James's, a dismal passage and dangerous, to see so many coffins exposed in the streets thin of people, the shops shut up and all mournful silence, as not knowing whose turn might be next."

It was not humanity's finest hour. The stricken were incarcerated in their homes or, if they had escaped London, prevented from traveling on roads, as the sight of one suppurating sore could touch off a riot. Fleeing Londoners, whether infected or not, were often pelted with rocks and dung at the outskirts of villages. Con artists and quacks peddled phony cures, and the rich and powerful jumped ship like the rats that were carrying the plague. The horror of the disease was unspeakable, dispatching an estimated 100,000 by the time this epidemic began to

abate, around Christmas 1665, when the cold started to kill off the fleas. In February, the king returned to London to survey—in safety, he thought—the melancholy scene of a decimated London still smelling of rotted flesh. But the rough hand of fate hadn't finished with London yet.

On September 2, 1666, a baker's oven in Pudding Lane was left unbanked. Its sparks, teased out of the chimney by a stiff wind, fired like tinder the dry wood of summer-baked houses, igniting the entire city in a matter of hours. Pepys was called at three in the morning by a servant to look at the fire, and, being used to little local fires in the cramped wooden alleys and byways of London, he "thought it to be on the back side of Mark Lane at the furthest. . . . I thought it far enough off, and so went back to bed."

The lord mayor also brushed off the fire, saying, "a woman might piss it out," and no measures were taken to control the conflagration until it was too late. Amazingly, only a handful of people lost their lives, one of them a servant in the house of the baker where the fire had started. John Evelyn described a ghastly picture of the event two days after it started: "The burning still rages, and it was now gotten as far as the Inner Temple; all Fleet Street, the Old Bailey, Ludgate Hill, Warwick Lane, Newgate, Paul's Chain, Watling Street, now flaming, and most of it reduced to ashes; the stones of St. Paul's flew like grenados, the melting lead running down the streets in a stream, and the very pavements glowing with fiery redness, so as no horse nor man was able to tread on them, and the demolition had stopped all the passages, so that no help could be applied."

King Charles finally stepped in and did what the lord mayor should have done sooner: he had his navy blow up the houses in the way of the fire, creating a break in its path. After four grim days, the driving wind died down and the fire finally ended. In its wake lay an unrecognizable London, which had suffered untold losses in its architecture, parish records, art treasures, and books. In all, 436 acres of London had been consumed: 13,200 houses, 87 parish houses and many of their churches, 44 merchants' halls, the Royal Exchange, the magnificent medieval Guildhall, and St. Paul's Cathedral. It was, if nothing else, an opportunity to rebuild the city along straight and reasonable lines, obliterating the medieval maze of tiny streets that had contributed to the tragedy.

But this was not to be. Although both John Evelyn and the young Christopher Wren submitted designs for a new London with wide thoroughfares and sensible squares and circuses, the urgent need for housing and the legal problems of land ownership assured that the rebuilding followed the original "plan" of medieval London rather too faithfully. The only real improvements were lanes widened to a mandatory 14 feet and buildings made of stone. This was Wren's great opportunity, as he rebuilt 51 of the ruined churches, including St. Paul's Cathedral. Despite the loss of many of those edifices during World War II, Wren's name will forever be associated with the glory of his age, as London rose like a phoenix from the ashes of the fire

into the magnificence of the 18th century. But before the glory of that age came the bloodless Glorious Revolution, which changed forever the roles of monarch and Parliament.

THE CROWDED THRONE: KING JAMES AND WILLIAM AND MARY

THE THREE-YEAR REIGN OF JAMES II followed the death of his brother Charles II in 1685, and once again the old Catholic–Protestant enmities reared their ugly heads. James II (also styled James VII of Scotland) was raised Catholic, and once he ascended the throne, his sympathies were evidenced in his appointments of Catholics to key positions in the armed forces. His antipathy to Parliament—certainly influenced by his father Charles I’s own disdain of that governing body that left James fatherless—was indicated by the camp of soldiers he placed at the outskirts of London. When Parliament protested, James took a page out of his beheaded father’s book and decided that he did not require Parliament’s approval to rule.

Bad move. James kept his head but lost his throne in a coup that saw not one bullet fly. The Stuarts may be thanked for the rise of Parliament and the reduction of monarchical powers that over the centuries diminished the roles of English regents to little more than extremely overpaid ribbon cutters and fodder for gossip.

James’s Protestant daughter Mary had been wife to one William of Orange, a Dutch prince, for years when the call came for her to ascend the throne of England. Her husband had been a head of state in the Protestant Netherlands who had watched with ill ease as James’s second marriage produced a Catholic male heir to the throne. The idea of a religious alliance between France and England would have put the squeeze on the Netherlands and its busy trade. William of Orange led an invasion of a smaller army against James’s English forces, whose soldiers switched sides with alacrity. James II, like his brother Charles II before him, cut and ran to France, and William of Orange was welcomed warmly into London.

There was dissent between Whigs and Tories regarding which spouse should be regent and which consort, but ultimately the crown was offered to be shared equally between the two, thus giving us England’s first royal power couple. Good old John Evelyn was kind enough to weigh in with his opinion on the two: “She seems to be of a good nature, and that she takes nothing to heart; whilst the Prince her husband has a thoughtful countenance, is wonderfully serious and silent, and seems to treat all persons alike gravely, and to be very intent on affairs: Holland, Ireland, and France are calling for his care.” The common people never took to William with the same affection as they did to Mary—and the feelings were reciprocated all around—but with Parliament having passed a Bill of Rights limiting the actual powers of the throne, London could now rest easy that its interests were being looked after by politicians at least theoretically devoted to the city and its business.

Despite their moving to the pleasant countryside of Kensington from the palace of Whitehall in the first year of their reign to avoid central London's dread contagions and mephitic stink, Mary II died of smallpox in 1694. William III died in 1702 after being thrown from a horse. Mary's sister Anne succeeded the couple quietly; her relatively dull 12-year reign is remembered primarily for the naming of a lacy wildflower and a style of furniture. The last of the Stuart line and the last monarch to veto an act of Parliament, Anne was on the throne when England and Scotland were unified as Great Britain. *1066 and All That*, a hilarious history of England published in 1930, summed up the queen thus: "Finally the Orange . . . was succeeded by the memorable dead queen, Anne. . . . The Whigs being the first to realize that the Queen had been dead all the time, chose George I as King."

GEORGIAN LONDON

TO MOST LONDON CONNOISSEURS, the 1700s remain the very apex of the city's greatness: in architecture, literature, theater, painting, sculpture, philosophy and sciences, and the building of stately homes and parks, no other epoch can rival 18th-century London for its verve and creativity. The artists, thinkers, and artisans of the day have come to define their disciplines: William Hogarth, Sir Joshua Reynolds, and Thomas Gainsborough (painting); Jonathan Swift, Henry Fielding, and Oliver Goldsmith (literature); David Garrick (theater); Alexander Pope (poetry); Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley (feminism and philosophy); John Nash and Robert Adams (architecture); Capt. James Cook (exploration); Adam Smith and Jeremy Bentham (economics); and composer George Frederic Handel, a naturalized British subject.

Of course, one can hardly mention London and the 18th century in the same breath without a bow to the looming figure of the formidable writer, lexicographer, and London lover Dr. Samuel Johnson, immortalized by his quotable words as much as by his biographer and friend, James Boswell. Countless other less acclaimed but no less important figures—sadly, it is mostly men who make the list—made major breakthroughs in technology, medicine, and science in this robust century.

There was something in the air, it would seem, and not just the stench of the tanneries, slaughterhouses, and privies. In the 100-year span of this period, London grew from 650,000 souls to close to a million. The small villages north and west of the city were embraced by London's expansion. Near the hamlet of Knightsbridge, a country house was bought and grandly rebuilt by the duke of Buckingham, then later purchased by King George III as a private royal residence.

From Germany in 1714 came the Hanoverian succession, from whom the present royal family is descended. Georges I through IV presided over the acquisition of land from Canada to Australia and the ignominious loss of the wealthy American colonies to the war of independence. They saw the rise of a new technology that revolutionized

the cotton and wool trades of England. They watched as the Bastille was stormed, igniting the French Revolution, and managed to keep their crowns steady while the aristocracy across the channel were losing their heads. They continued to speak German while ruling an English-speaking kingdom. Because of this undiplomatic oddity, the position of prime minister came to be necessary. The absolute rule of royalty began to be challenged: thanks to the madness of King George III (later identified as porphyria), the dissolute lifestyle and limited intellect of prince regent George IV, and, later, the age and gender of young Queen Victoria, the policymaking powers of the monarch were quietly whittled away by an increasingly powerful Parliament and a succession of prime ministers who rejected the role of royal flunkie.

Despite the philosophical advances of the period, the daily life of London as it expanded was attended by an increase in crime, corruption, drinking, and poverty. Dr. Johnson—whose remark that “when a man is tired of London, he is tired of life” was not without its irony—wrote a poem about London that exposed this dark underbelly:

*Here malice, rapine, accident, conspire,
And now a rabble rages, now a fire;
Their ambush here relentless ruffians lay,
And here the fell attorney prowls for prey;
Here falling houses thunder on your head,
And here a female atheist talks you dead. . . .
Prepare for death if here at night you roam,
And sign your will before you sup from home. . . .*

An increasing polarization—owing to the incipient Industrial Revolution—shaped London society into strict camps of owners and workers, rich and poor. The middle and upper classes’ brutal insensitivity to the less fortunate was about as pervasive and shocking as the casual violence of Dark Age societies. The entertainments of the bourgeoisie included outings to insane asylums for a laugh—Bethlehem Hospital, aka Bedlam, was a favorite venue—and attendance at public executions, where they were fleeced by locals who charged outrageous prices for a window seat overlooking Newgate Prison’s scaffold. There was (as always, but particularly pronounced in those days) one law for the rich and one for the poor; criminals who weren’t executed for the slightest offense were forced to endure a grueling and often fatal passage to the new penal colony in Australia, or they were offloaded to the colonies of the Americas. Many of London’s powerless, often guilty of nothing more than being in the wrong place at the wrong time (typically, dead drunk in a tavern), were press-ganged into the Navy, as dire a fate as any jail or colony. It was only by the most vigorous repression of dissent that the revolution in France did not spread to London, which was hardly unaccustomed to anarchy in the streets, especially after the Gordon Riots of 1780, in which Newgate was stormed by an anti-Catholic mob and 300 were left dead.

London was not, however, lacking in notable reformers and progressive thinkers (most memorably Jonathan Swift, whose “Modest Proposal” to solve the problem of the Irish poor involved feeding their babies to the rich), whose pamphlets, essays, and the newfangled fad of the novel helped midwife a tradition of savage English satire and social commentary that found many outstanding exponents in the Victorian century.

VICTORIAN LONDON

QUEEN VICTORIA’S REIGN KICKED OFF IN 1837, after the unlamented last gasp of Georgian rule by the grotesque George IV, whose years as prince regent during his father’s illnesses inspired a kind of Sodom-on-the-Thames license among the upper classes, and who rivaled the Sun King in his noble excess and addiction to pleasure. George may have been the patron of John Nash, who developed Regent’s Park and filled the city with white-stucco-covered houses, but other than that, he didn’t do much for London, although the extravagance and vice of his court certainly filled the coffers of moneylenders, gambling dens, and whorehouses.

At his death, a very different kind of social order was born, or at the very least a reactionary new brand of hypocrisy was embraced. Only 18 years old when she became queen, Victoria gave her name to an age of moral rectitude and social mobility, reform and wretchedness, empire and exploitation.

Another name is so completely identified with 19th-century London that it has become an adjective describing certain awful aspects of it: Charles Dickens. He is never far from the hearts and minds of the London dweller (his face appears—appropriately, for one who wrote so much about money’s awful power—on the £10 note). It is Dickens’s London that we tend to think of when we envision the 19th century: poor Bob Cratchit freezing in Scrooge’s office; Pip and the convict Magwitch fleeing on the Thames under the cover of pea-soup fog; Oliver Twist asking for more gruel in the orphanage; the endless court case of *Jarndyce v. Jarndyce*.

Dickens was an insomniac who walked the streets of London for hours every night, alertly absorbing the sounds and secrets of the city. His is the resounding voice of 19th-century London, just as Pepys’s and John Evelyn’s were of the 17th. Through his compassionate reporting and fiction, Dickens awakened middle-class readers and the politicians who represented them to the misery of the poor. He helped steer England toward a more humane course, as reformers worked to abolish the slave trade, put limits on child labor, allow married women property and personal rights, extend suffrage, and open the first state schools.

The Industrial Revolution didn’t so much flower as detonate in the 19th century, crushing centuries of social, familial, and economic traditions in its coal-powered mechanical maw. The gulf between rich

and poor widened, landscape and atmosphere degraded, and farming villages destabilized, as impoverished people from the country trickled into a city already bursting at the seams with immigrants from the far reaches of the empire.

With this desperate pool of cheap labor at hand, London grew at an amazing rate. New houses were built in every direction, bringing formerly quiet outlying villages into London's urban scene. The first Underground train tunnels were excavated, sewers were built, transatlantic cable was laid, and the first police force was established. Overground train tracks originating in London crisscrossed the country, omnibuses were pulled through the streets by huge workhorses, streets were gaslit, and circuses bloomed among busy thoroughfares all over the city. Museums, monuments, learned societies, and public libraries flourished. The Great Exhibition of 1851, organized by Victoria's husband, Prince Albert, showed the world that London was a city of cosmopolitan suavity and culture, firmly looking to the future.

That Karl Marx wrote *Das Kapital* while living in this two-faced city has a persuasive epic logic. The terrible contrast between the shiny new city, with its shops and theaters, hotels and town houses, and the unmitigated squalor of the East End slums in many ways defined the Victorian Age.

Yet it was a time in which enormous changes took place, a time in which terrible injustices were institutionalized, uncovered, and, in some cases, at last redressed. It was also a time of unforgettable literature and indelible heroes. Any age that could produce Florence Nightingale, Oscar Wilde, and Lewis Carroll can't be all bad, after all.

WORLD WAR I

QUEEN VICTORIA MADE A PERFECT EXIT in January 1901, keeping her era tidily defined by century. Her eldest son, Albert Edward (whom she always called "poor Bertie"), after years of dallying at dining, bridge, and adultery, finally emerged from his mother's long shadow to be crowned King Edward VII. His was a short reign—only a decade, a mere fraction of his mother's 64 years on the throne—but it was distinctive enough to earn the title of the Edwardian Age, England's last era to be named for a monarch. It was a clear cusp between the centuries, a time of accelerated progress during which motorcars became common, corsets came off, women demonstrated for the vote, and a number of Victorian verities began to be challenged.

A well-known sensualist of the time, King Edward helped unleash a more permissive era in which free love, divorce, and bohemian living arrangements could be practiced without complete social ostracism. The famously free-thinking Bloomsbury Group formed around this time, comprising certain artists and writers living in the then-shabby-genteel neighborhood near the British Museum. The Bloomsburyites redefined not only their artistic disciplines but also their relationships. A famous quote of Virginia Woolf's—"In or about December 1910,

human character changed”—underscores the leap made in thought and behavior by this new generation, one whose youth was stolen or poisoned by the conflagration then gathering in Europe.

In 1914, London and the British Empire enjoyed the zenith of their world power. The British pound sterling, as safe as gold, was the currency of commerce all over the globe. There was peace and prosperity. Social activists were busy working to secure the vote for women, get children out of the factories and into classrooms, and force legislation making government responsible for its neediest citizens.

But the shadow of German zeppelins loomed above London. Despite the efforts of pacifists like George Bernard Shaw, England plunged into the ghastly battles fought across the channel, battles that very nearly wiped out an entire generation of young Englishmen. By the time World War I ended in 1918, the whole social order had changed again. It was a completely different London, filled with shell-shocked veterans, emancipated women, and tumbrel-talking aristocrats.

THE LONG WEEKEND: 1918–1939

IT COULD BE SAID THAT THE PERIOD BETWEEN the two World Wars was a last glimmer of glamour for London. There is truth in that observation, despite the ugly rumblings of black-shirted British fascists led by Nazi sympathizer Sir Oswald Mosley, despite the economic depression that left millions unemployed, and despite the terrible losses of life, limb, and hope during WWI. It may be that we view this interlude with an acute awareness of how much was soon to be buried under the Blitz, making any frivolity of that time seem more poignant than silly.

People embraced the work of humorist P. G. Wodehouse, who helped his readers shake off the blues of the war and the depression. To this day, the country loves Wodehouse's vision of London between the wars: gin-soaked parties with bright young things, dim Right Honorables, creaking lords and terrifying aunts, the Drones Club, and of course the unflappable Jeeves and his young master, Bertie Wooster. They inhabit a hilarious and strangely innocent fictional world that reveals what made London laugh between cataclysms. Noël Coward, Cecil Beaton, Siegfried Sassoon, Virginia Woolf, Robert Graves, George Orwell, Nancy Mitford, W. H. Auden, and T. S. Eliot captured other shades of feeling and insights of that brief respite between the horrors, which Graves summed up aptly in the title of his book *The Long Weekend*.

London gave Hollywood a run for its money during this time, making movies with such luminaries as Laurence Olivier, Peggy Ashcroft, Charles Laughton, and Alfred Hitchcock. Agatha Christie and Dorothy Sayers fed the increasing demand for murder mysteries. The West End was alive with plays, from melodramas to social realism. But nothing cooked up in the imagination could even come close to the real-life drama of 1936: the abdication of King Edward VIII for

the woman he loved, the American divorcée Mrs. Wallis Simpson. Although the event was billed as a grave constitutional crisis, the British monarchy clearly was becoming increasingly irrelevant to its subjects, save as newsreel filler. The citizens were mainly concerned with their own lives as they joined trade unions, built suburban communities, and tried to figure out the map of the Underground. In 1931, this tangled web was brought to heel by a man named Harry Beck and simplified into the sleek Art Deco design we know and love, and the population of eight million began using the tube not only to commute to work but also to escape the befogged, coal-smutted city to ever-more-distant reaches of residential London.

Meanwhile, across the English Channel, Europe was increasingly threatened by Adolf Hitler, who had been dismissed by most intelligent Londoners as a twisted clown but admired by a shameful number of hate-filled fascists and dim-witted minor (and some major) aristocrats. But England's initial inaction, for whatever reasons, soon reaped a whirlwind, as his Luftwaffe rained destruction on London and Europe's fleeing Jews came to town with stories of concentration camps and genocide too horrible to countenance.

THE BLITZ: "THEIR FINEST HOUR"

WORLD WAR I, THE "WAR TO END ALL WARS," couldn't live up to that promise for long: only two decades after the armistice was signed, London was once again anxiously watching the skies over Whitehall. This time the threat came not from lumbering zeppelins but from significantly-more-deadly Messerschmitts, Stukas, and unpiloted "doodlebugs" filled with deadly ordnance. The attacks started in earnest on the sunny day of September 7, 1940, when hundreds of fighter planes and bombers buzzed up the Thames and destroyed docks, gasworks, and power stations. The Luftwaffe went on to bomb London nightly for 76 consecutive nights, dropping more than 27,000 high explosives and thousands more incendiaries. The Blitz was on.

The night of December 29, 1940, was the worst, with the city almost burned to the ground and St. Paul's Cathedral under serious threat. Children were hurriedly sent to the countryside or to America, but the royal family made a point of staying in town, even after nine bombs fell on Buckingham Palace. People sought shelter in the tube stations in staggeringly large numbers, sleeping on the ground or in bunk beds placed on the tracks and platforms. Above ground, civilians coped with bombed-out streets, nightly fires, disrupted railways, power and water failures, the destruction of their homes, and, most terribly, the deaths of their friends, neighbors, and families. Novelist Nancy Mitford described the scene vividly in a letter to a friend:

I find my nerves are standing up to the thing better now—I don't tremble quite all the time as I did. . . . NOBODY can have the slightest idea of what it is like until they've experienced it. As for the screaming bombs, they simply make your flesh creep but the whole

thing is so fearful that they are actually only a slight added horror. The great fires everywhere, the awful din which never stops, and wave after wave after wave of aeroplanes, ambulances tearing up the street and the horrible unnatural blaze of lights from search-lights, etc.—all has to be experienced to be understood. Then in the morning the damage—people ring one another up to tell one how their houses are completely non-existent. . . . People are beyond praise, everyone is red eyed and exhausted but you never hear a word of complaint or down-heartedness. It is most reassuring.

—From *Nancy Mitford*, by Selena Hastings
(Hamish Hamilton, 1985)

The bombardment put to the test the famous English stiff upper lip, and London's rise to the challenge earned the admiration of the rest of the country and the world. To this day, veterans of the Blitz are notably tough-minded about their experience; ask an old woman about living through the war, and you won't get much more from her than the simple declaration, "We just got on with it—what else could we do?" Winston Churchill was more eloquent as the voice of the people during those dark days, author of such unforgettable war cries as "We shall defend our island, whatever the cost may be, we shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender," and "Let us therefore brace ourselves to our duties, and so bear ourselves that, if the British Empire and its Commonwealth last for a thousand years, men will still say, 'This was their finest hour.'"

And so it was. Despite the thousands killed, the millions wounded and displaced, the destruction of hundreds of thousands of dwelling places and buildings, and the near-total destruction of the city and the East End, London pulled up its socks and carried on. "Mustn't grumble" was the motto of the day, as people were keen to the even-worse suffering of others around them and on the Continent. When the bomb sirens wailed, Londoners took refuge in corrugated steel caves called Anderson shelters (to be replaced later by the heavier Morrison shelters) buried three feet underground. The homeless were sheltered by hotels—when the East End was first bombed, a huge crowd marched to the Savoy and demanded to be admitted, which they were—as well as by the not-completely-invulnerable tube stations. Brigades of men and women pulled all-night duties to put out fires in likely targets such as Westminster Abbey and St. Paul's Cathedral, saving some of the precious treasures of London's past. When the war finally ended, it could be well said of the blitzed Londoners that, again in the words of Churchill, "their will was resolute and remorseless, and as it proved, unconquerable."

SUNSET OF THE EMPIRE

IN 1948, ENGLAND LOST THE JEWEL of her colonial crown when India became independent, and over the next decade she continued to

lose colonies around the world, as well as much of the shipping and manufacturing business that had made her rich. The 1950s were spent cleaning up the wreckage of the Blitz and maneuvering around strict food rationing. There was a grayness in the city: the gaps of bombing sites yawned among the old Victorian buildings that were still black with coal grime and sagging under the weight of the years. Many people abandoned the city for the suburbs, whose spread was contained by the public lands of the Green Belt on the outer perimeters of London. The welfare improvements of the Labour government helped people rebuild their lives and gave them a sense of security unknown up to that time. In 1946, Heathrow Airport was opened, followed by Gatwick Airport three years later; the city was quickly rebuilt with modern glass-and-steel towers. People began to buy motorcars, and domestic-labor-saving devices were new, plentiful, and affordable.

The most influential advance of the time was certainly the “telly,” on which people watched the coronation of Elizabeth II on June 2, 1953, from the comfort of their armchairs. Prime Minister Harold Macmillan said in 1959, “Most of our people never had it so good.”

The Festival of Britain celebrated the centennial of Prince Albert’s Great Exhibition, and it was on that site the South Bank Centre came to be. The fog lifted, thanks to antipollution measures, and the future looked as bright as the sky on a clear day. A new age was indeed coming, and it was a doozy. After the war, a quarter of the map of the world was colored pink to denote English colonial possessions; by the mid-1960s, England had lost almost all of her empire.

THE SWINGING '60s AND PUNK '70s

WHATEVER ENGLAND MAY HAVE LOST in world supremacy, London compensated for by becoming ground zero of the 1960s “youthquake.” The iconic figures of the Beatles and James Bond joined the thinner ones of Twiggy and Julie Christie in making all things British very hip. England was swinging like a pendulum, and London, as always, was the epicenter of the groove.

Movies such as *A Hard Day’s Night*, *Blow-Up*, *To Sir with Love*, and *A Man for All Seasons* were worldwide hits. The comedy of Spike Milligan gave way to that of Monty Python. Michael Caine, Vanessa and Lynn Redgrave, Oliver Reed, and Terence Stamp were among the many English stars who could pull off a Hollywood blockbuster as adeptly as a Pinter or Shakespeare play in the West End. Peter Sellers’s Inspector Clouseau made him a superstar—a word and concept born in the bright light of the 1960s.

Fashion designers of Carnaby Street and the King’s Road started the miniskirt and bell-bottom trends, and fashion photographers such as David Bailey became as famous as their subjects. The Beatles, the Rolling Stones, The Kinks, Cream, Small Faces, Fairport Convention, Pink Floyd, The Yardbirds, Led Zeppelin, The Who . . . London’s bands in the 1960s were a veritable *Debrett’s Peerage* of rock and roll.

Twenty-something rock stars and their birds got their clothes at Granny Takes a Trip and Biba, drove around in Bentleys, and bought stately old piles in the country from hard-up toffs. *Hair* was performed in the West End, scandalizing audiences with its on-stage nudity. The Rolling Stones put on a free concert in Hyde Park, which was also the scene of political demonstrations and love-ins. Sex, drugs, and rock and roll became a way of life for many of the new generation.

No one did sex, drugs, and rock and roll better than the glam rockers and punks of the 1970s, who went to extremes. Green mohawk hairdos, safety pins piercing cheeks, very high platform shoes, and in-your-face attitudes were commonplace sights along the King's Road, where designer Vivienne Westwood and impresario Malcolm McLaren (who later managed the Sex Pistols) ran a punk-rock clothing shop—still open, with the crazy backward-moving clock outside. If you'd told Westwood that she would one day receive an Order of the British Empire from the queen and have her own exhibition at the V&A, this peroxided punk goddess with the artfully ripped shirts would have told you to sod off, or words to that effect.

Feminism had many local, brilliant exponents, with Angela Carter writing in south London and Aussie expat Germaine Greer writing *The Female Eunuch* in her flat on the King's Road. The literature of the day was pretty dark; Martin Amis's *Dead Babies* was a savage and chilling portrait of young people in 1970s London that opened the door to many imitators. The film *A Clockwork Orange*, adapted by Stanley Kubrick in 1972 from the novel by Anthony Burgess, was a surreal prediction of a London gone viciously mad in the not-too-distant future. Squatters took over entire buildings that had been earmarked for renovation; the 17.5% value-added tax was introduced; and a Women's Year Rally coincided with the election of Margaret Thatcher as leader of the Conservative Party. By the time Sex Pistol Sid Vicious had stabbed his girlfriend to death and then overdosed in New York City, people were exhausted and disillusioned with the so-called Me Decade of the 1970s. It seemed time to get on to more-upbeat pastimes—like that old-time London passion, making money.

THE THATCHER YEARS

WHEN MARGARET THATCHER WAS ELECTED prime minister in 1979, she announced the somewhat astonishing goal of returning to Victorian values. She axed 40,000 civil-service jobs and wrested control of Transport for London from the Greater London Council (GLC), selling it to private investors. The gap between rich and poor widened, as a very Victorian economic and social Darwinism—the survival of the fittest and fattest cats—took shape. After fighting constantly with the Labour-based GLC over social services and privatization, Thatcher abolished the council altogether in 1986, and the building on the Thames that housed it stood empty until the Marriott Hotel moved in.

People in The City (the financial district of London) were suddenly making big money, property prices skyrocketed, and the materialistic yuppie came to define the era in both England and the United States.

London in the 1980s also saw race riots in Brixton, the first cases of AIDS, strikes by tube- and steelworkers, and a ban on smoking on the Underground after a fire at King's Cross killed 31 people. Homelessness rose disturbingly as Thatcher ripped holes in the socialist safety net, and the real-estate boom took its toll on government housing.

But all that money had a salubrious affect on the surface of London, as many of the old white-stucco fronts of private homes and the marble of grand old buildings got a good scrub, erasing years of coal smoke from their faces. Look at any photo of London in the mid-20th century and compare it to contemporary views: even allowing for sepia-toned discolorment, the change is startling. Throwing off the old habits of war blackouts, London became luminous, shining arc lights on its many monuments and museums. Even Harrods started lighting up, outlined in white bulbs that locals called tawdry but secretly admired. Another bright (and tawdry) spot in the 1980s was, of course, the "fairy tale" marriage of Lady Diana Spencer and Prince Charles at St. Paul's Cathedral in 1981, watched by millions on TV and providing a much-needed popularity punch to the boring old House of Windsor. In 1989, Thatcher closed out her decade by resigning (to put it nicely—she was pushed out with extreme prejudice), and John Major took over as prime minister.

COOL BRITANNIA: THE 1990S

THIS DECADE STARTED WITH THE HISTORICAL joining of the French and English sides of the new "chunnel" beneath the English Channel, linking Paris and London with a three-hour train ride whose duration gets shorter every decade (it's currently down to two and a half hours). The xenophobic fear that hordes of foreigners would breach London by rail never quite materialized, although the train surely had a part to play in the huge upsurge of tourism in the 1990s.

In 1992, Queen Elizabeth II suffered her famous *annus horribilis* (you've got to love a monarch who uses Latin the way other people use slang). It was indeed a pretty bad year for her: a fire at Windsor Castle caused extensive damage, and the marital troubles of Charles and Diana and Andrew and Fergie went horrendously public. Worst of all, the queen herself, one of the richest women in the world, learned that she would have to pay taxes for the first time in her life. Not one to leave books unbalanced—this is a woman who lived through the Blitz and food rationing—she decided to pay for the repair of Windsor Castle by opening Buckingham Palace to the public for two months a year. Both residences now rake in so much money that there was enough left over to upgrade the Queen's Gallery, where we can now see even more royal treasures.

The 1990s saw a number of cultural developments, such as the rise of the “Britpack” of young artists whose work made traditionalists wonder if they were losing touch: Damien Hirst’s animal carcasses floating in formaldehyde, Chris Ofili’s elephant-dung Virgin Mary, and Tracy Emin’s unmade bed won prizes and patrons. Brits started being funny again, with *French and Saunders*, *Absolutely Fabulous*, Eddie Izzard, *The Fast Show*, and *Blackadder* whizzing around the globe on DVD to amuse Anglophones everywhere. By the time the Britpop explosion signaled the start of “Cool Britannia,” everyone in the world knew that London was again the place to be. The Spice Girls, Oasis, All Saints, and Robbie Williams put British music back at the top of the charts. London Fashion Week became one of the hottest tickets in Europe, rivaling even Milan and Paris as the event at which to showcase new collections.

In May 1997, Tony Blair of the Labour Party was voted in as prime minister, signaling an end to the Conservative Party’s 18-year run and beginning a historic three-term reign. Blair ran on a platform of finding the “third way” between the policies of Tory and Labour, and he succeeded mainly in annoying both parties. In August, the world was stunned by the death of Diana, Princess of Wales, in a Paris car crash inspired a week of completely un-British mourning. It was a spasm of national grief that had Buckingham Palace going head-to-head with Tony Blair, who convinced the queen that she must show her subjects that she cared about the “People’s Princess.” It was a weird moment in media culture: the queen was scolded daily by the newspapers, which later had no objection to the stiff upper lip with which the queen mourned her mother’s and sister’s deaths. But Diana had been a media creation, and the queen quickly discovered that the media was in charge of this circus; she was soon seen wading through the flowers piled in front of Buckingham Palace, affecting interest in the notes left by an unprecedentedly emotional populace. People stood in line for days to sign the condolence book at St. James’s Palace, while a sea of flowers numbering in the millions was left at the gates of Kensington Palace. It was a London no one had ever seen before and will likely never see again—only a few years later, people who had participated in the orgy of public mourning admitted to being slightly bewildered and red-faced over it all.

A NEW WORLD: AFTER SEPTEMBER 11

THE TERRORIST ATTACKS ON THE PENTAGON in Washington, D.C., and the World Trade Center in New York City threw the world into a state of panic, and the hardest-hit business was the travel trade, from airlines to souvenir shops. London, as significant a symbol of Western capitalism and culture as New York, went into high alert. Having coped with years of terrorism wrought by the Irish Republican Army, the city went quietly into action, permanently closing the street in front

of the U.S. Embassy, arresting suspected Al Qaeda members, and stepping up security in Parliament and other high-profile institutions.

The number of visitors to London dropped dramatically in the months following the attack, and the buoyant financial outlook of the 1990s gave way to a nervous slide in the stock market, real estate, and consumer goods. Tourism took an even greater hit when England and Tony Blair became partners with the United States in the coalition forces in Iraq. The dearth of tourists, ironically, corresponded to the completion of new hotels and restaurants responding to the boom trend of the '90s; by the time people began getting on planes again, the exchange rate of dollar to pound was topping out at \$1.95, transforming even midrange hotel prices of £150 to a terrifying \$292 a night.

The year 2002 was the queen's Golden (50th) Jubilee, which turned out to be a total lovefest for Lizzie. She certainly needed the cheering up, as she had recently lost her sister, Princess Margaret, and her mother, the Queen Mum Elizabeth, who died at age 101.

In April 2005, Prince Charles finally wed his mistress of 30 years, Camilla Parker Bowles, who became the Duchess of Cornwall to mixed reactions. The following month, Tony Blair was reelected prime minister for a historically unprecedented third time for a Labour Party member. Then, on July 7, 2005, in what have come to be called the 7/7 attacks, four British-born Muslim terrorists detonated four bombs on the Underground and on a bus, killing an estimated 55 innocent people but producing the finest example of grace under fire seen since the Blitz. While American soldiers at a nearby military base were ordered to stay out of London for five days, Londoners were back on the tube the next day and continued to display implacable calm in the face of the horror.

As of this writing, the city is still unwieldy and difficult for the average citizen. Public transportation suffers from high fares and low expectations. Tube strikes often bring the city to a standstill (though thankfully not with the regularity of Métro strikes in Paris), automobile traffic is still bad, roadwork causes constant traffic jams, and the streets after midnight are rife with the shouts of drunken louts and the assault of the occasional mugger. Pubs are now allowed to stay open past 11 p.m., a baffling "solution" to the public drunkenness associated with the drink-all-you-can-before-closing syndrome. To the delight of many, smoking has finally been banned in restaurants and other public places. Now if they could do something about the air pollution, public-transport problems, airport delays, street crime, and high prices, we might start breathing more easily.

The bottom line is that London is and always has been a big city with big problems, along with its myriad delights. But no matter what the century, London will *always* remain a fascinating, fast-paced, infuriating, and fun-filled destination of choice.



QUEUES, *the* WEATHER, *and a* STIFF UPPER LIP

A FOREIGN TRIBE

ENGLISH-SPEAKING TRANSATLANTICS enjoy the great advantage of sharing a language with Londoners. That is not to say that you won't encounter communication problems, but at least you'll know the words, if not always the meaning behind them. The great misunderstandings are not in language but in nuance. This is a society based on the oblique and the tacit, with an intrinsic orderliness that springs from the old class system. You'll never understand it in the course of a visit, so just be polite and go along with the program. Nobody's going to change a hair for you.

George Bernard Shaw said that it is impossible for one Englishman to open his mouth without inviting the disdain of another. These days, some people would very much like to believe this is no longer true; whether it is still reality is open to argument. What is referred to as "received BBC pronunciation" has wrought some changes in the various accents of England. Professor Henry Higgins, in Shaw's *Pygmalion*, had the entertaining ability to identify the very street on which a Londoner grew up by his accent. You don't have to be a linguist to ascertain who was raised in South London, East London, or in a boarding school, but these accents are no longer strictly defined by class. (In fact, a recent article claimed that casting agents are having a harder time finding actors who can speak with the upper-class accent; today's posh hide their origins behind what's called Estuary English—a cross between the BBC accent and the working-class pronunciation of the Home Counties.) It is certain, however, that whether you are American, Australian, South African, or Kiwi, you'll be treated with curious amusement and the occasional flicker of contempt.

GET IN LINE: THE ENGLISH ART OF QUEUING

ALL THE RUMORS ARE TRUE: the British line up for pretty much everything—not for them the mad dash and bowling over of obstacles in the race for your objective. It's just common sense: find your place at the back of a line and hold it against certain chaos and injustice. Even soccer hooligans queue for tickets and beer. To jump the queue is the height of bad manners, and to do so is to invite certain tut-tutting, raised eyebrows, muttered comments, or, in the case of soccer games, a punch in the face. In fact, breaking in line is such a breach of etiquette that it is about the only time the British will break another taboo: the one that prohibits raising one's voice—or speaking to a stranger—in public (markets, pubs, and soccer stadiums notwithstanding). Nowadays, the order of the bus queue has been breached, and you no longer see neat single-file lines along the pavement, but please do not give a little old lady the elbow and jump ahead of her. You'll regret it.

In some travel situations—buses included, usually long-distant coaches—you will find a line formed, in which case you should take your place at the back. Don't even think of playing the befuddled foreigner and pushing in at the front.


WEATHER REPORTS

THE BRITISH PASSION for talking about the weather amounts nearly to an obsession. They will even go so far as to discuss it vigorously with complete strangers: as Dr. Johnson observed back in the day, “When two Englishmen meet, their first talk is of the weather.” And frankly, it's rich material for discussion—London can easily go through four seasons in one day. The casting of aspersions on the abilities of the forecasters is a tried-and-true ice-breaker that will pave the way for inquiries about the extreme and interesting weather (tornadoes, blizzards, hurricanes, monsoons, sandstorms, and so on) of former colonial continents. As everyone must know by now, the famous London fogs of the past were a result of the coal burned in the city, and a bona fide “pea souper” hasn't been sighted since the early 1960s, after the Clean Air Act of 1956 put a stop to industrial pollution.

The idea that it rains constantly in London is also a myth, although there isn't one Londoner who doesn't own at least one umbrella (called a brolly; some 7,000 are lost on London buses and trains a year), nor will you find many visitors who haven't been forced to buy a rain poncho or an umbrella on short notice. The once reliably cool summers have, like so much of the world, fallen prey to ferocious heat spells, made more hellish by the lack of air-conditioning on public transport and in some restaurants and hotels. However, such sweltering is short-lived compared with the blistering heat of southern Europe.

THE GREAT BRITISH RESERVE

THIS IS ALIVE AND WELL, stiffening the upper lip and continuing to define “Englishness.” Anthropologist Kate Fox maintains that this detachment is a function of social uneasiness rather than coldness or arrogance. It is also manifest in a reluctance to toot one's own horn: if anything, the English are competitive in their self-deprecation, which is almost always based in humor. You will see it displayed in the advertising, in which wit and wordplay take precedence over volume, sloganeering, and repetition (although this may come to be a relic of the past, as ads with vulgar wording and scantily clad models grow apace on the sides of buses and on billboards). It is apparent in the weather forecasts—“Today will be rather damp, with a possibility of patchy fog and maybe a spot of drizzle in between clear intervals”—and on the tube at rush hour, where instead of mouthing off at an annoying commuter who refuses to move down in the carriage,

 **unofficial TIP**
Always stand to the right when riding on escalators. The locals, even if they have no intention of passing you, hate it when tourists stand two abreast and clog up the path.

passengers will mutter excuse-me's, issue exasperated coughs, and initiate great flappings of newspapers.

Such quietude can be almost soothing and welcome to an American accustomed to the chattering hordes of compatriots asking personal questions, bragging about themselves, and offering the usual too much information, but it can take a bit of getting used to at first and might leave the visitor feeling a little out in the cold. The traditional silence on buses and trains has been broken by people shouting into their mobile phones, but the prevailing mood on public transport can still be strangely meditative—Fox calls it denial: denial that there are other people around you, mixed with a strange denial that you are there as well.

However, such reserve is not to be taken for granted, as there are exceptions to this cloak of invisibility in which the British perceive others as being clad, and which also covers them when in public. Road rage is a big problem in traffic-choked London, but luckily gun laws are stringent enough that it results in shouting matches and fisticuffs rather than more-serious consequences. And there is nothing quite as ominous to the uninitiated as the roar of 10,000 grown men at a soccer game singing with one voice, “You’re shite and you know you are!” Not for them the cozy familiarity of the seventh-inning stretches and the lilting tones of “Take Me Out to the Ballgame.”

A similar contradiction to the stereotype is found during the prime minister’s question period in the House of Commons. Barely veiled or even naked insults are hurled by members of Parliament at one another, while howls of derision and guffaws of braying laughter render the institution more like a classroom whose teacher has stepped out than a hallowed hall of government. There is something rather invigorating about this cacophony, and it gives you an idea of the healthy self-regard in which the English hold themselves, despite their protestations of humility. The great paradox is that they yield to no one, even if some of them get weak at the knees before the queen.

TO DO OR NOT TO DO: THAT IS THE CULTURE

AN ARTICLE IN *THE SPECTATOR* MAGAZINE a few years ago gave the worst possible advice to put in a tourist guide to London. The writers came up with, among other “tips,” “Introduce yourself and shake hands all around in your train compartment” and “Try out the famous echo in the British Library Reading Room.” As funny as we find this concept, we will resist temptation and will give you some do’s and don’ts guaranteed to be 100% valid. (Exceptions to all of the following, based on class, manners, eccentricity, and specific circumstances, will apply.)

- **Don’t** call older people by their first names unless expressly invited to do so—in fact, it is considered normal not to use any names at all when addressing people.
- **Don’t** expect people to introduce you to others. One can spend an entire evening with a group of people who introduce neither themselves nor

their friends to you. This is not bad manners; rather, it has something to do with the don't-be-pushy rule that prevails at most gatherings. Introductions can only be undertaken by the correct factotum, and nobody will know who that might be, so they keep quiet (as may the correct factotum, not wanting to look self-important).

- **Don't** try to intervene in soccer arguments—it's a very serious subject, one that no outsider can comprehend properly. Remember at games that the hooligans mean business.
- **Don't** take it personally when people act as if you're invisible, correct your pronunciation, look at you with disdain when you ask for directions to "Lye-cester Square," act slightly exasperated by your inability to read a byzantine map of London, or try to run you down in the street. You'll run across a lot of this—get used to it.
- **Don't** brag about how much sunlight you get at home; this will not endear you to anyone.
- **Don't** tell anyone that their accent is "cute." It is you who has the accent, and it is not considered remotely cute by the British.
- **Don't** gloat about the American Revolution, the bracing but (to Londoners) rather last-minute entrance of Yankee troops into World War II, or the sunset on the British Empire. Again, not cute.
- **Do** watch out for queues and take your place in them.
- **Do** be polite. Courtesy is appreciated much more than friendliness, and it's more likely to be reciprocated.
- **Do** remember that this is a country of rules, rules, rules—and that people aren't just making them up as they go along, though it sometimes seems that way.
- **Do** be patient in restaurants and stores; use your vacation as an opportunity to slow down and practice your good manners.
- **Do** learn to enjoy being called "luv" and "darling" and "sweetheart" by certain strangers.
- **Do** prepare for your visit by reading as much as you can about London, and when here, try to listen more than you speak. This is a very interesting place, and the people are fascinatingly foreign, in speech, attitudes, and humor.

Divided by a Common Language: A British-English Glossary

Thanks to the broadcasting of American television shows and films (in London, people go see films at the cinema, as opposed to viewing movies or flicks at the theater), the British are more hip to our lingo than we are to theirs. Even if you've read the English versions of the Harry Potter books, watched plenty of Britcoms on cable and Britflicks at the cinema, or been a *Masterpiece Theatre* junkie for decades, you may need a bit of a leg up. We've assembled a short glossary of words you may not have caught watching *Pride and Prejudice*, *Little Britain*, or *King Lear*. With the globalization of culture, it is almost quaint to assume that we English speakers might misunderstand each other, but just in case, here goes. . . .

AMERICAN ENGLISH

BRITISH ENGLISH

AT THE AIRPORT

cart	trolley
bill	bank note
wallet	billfold/purse

ON THE ROAD

baby carriage/stroller	pram/buggy
baggage room	left-luggage office
detour	diversion
divided highway	dual carriageway
highway exit	motorway junction
hood (car)	bonnet
minivan	people carrier
sedan car	saloon car
overpass	flyover
one-way ticket	single journey
round-trip ticket	return ticket
truck	lorry
trunk	boot
underpass (pedestrian, under streets)	subway

AT THE HOTEL

baby crib	cot
closet	cupboard/wardrobe
coffee/tea with or without milk	black or white
cot	extra bed or camp bed
first floor	ground floor
long-distance call	trunk call
outlet/socket	power point
second floor	first floor
vacuum	Hoover

IN A RESTAURANT OR FOOD STORE

buffet	sideboard
check	bill
cookie	biscuit
cracker	savoury biscuit
dessert	pudding
French fries	chips
ground beef	mince
molasses	black treacle
potato chips	crisps
smoked herring	kipper
zucchini	courgette

AT THE THEATER

aisle	gangway
balcony	gallery/upper circle
intermission	interval
mezzanine/loge	dress circle
movie theater	cinema

IN THE MARKETS AND ON THE HIGH STREET

diaper	nappy
eraser	rubber
hardware store	ironmonger
liquor store	off-license
panties	knickers
panty hose	tights
raincoat	macintosh (or mac)/cagoule
restroom	public convenience/loo/w.c./lavatory
sneakers	trainers or plimsolls
shorts (underwear)	pants
sweater	jumper
undershirt	vest
vest	waistcoat

IN SICKNESS AND IN HEALTH

acetaminophen (Tylenol)	paracetamol
adhesive bandages	plasters
emergency room	casualty department
rubbing alcohol	surgical spirit