

A personal selection of local, British Isles and world, history.

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THE GREAT FIRE OF LONDON

The facts of the 1666 fire have not always been correctly understood according to



1. It didn't start on Pudding Lane

Perhaps one of the most perpetuated myths that are passed as fact is that the fire started on Pudding Lane. Farriner's bakery was actually located in a small enclave just off Pudding Lane called Fish Yard.

2. It didn't stop the Great Plague

Another widely spread belief is that the Great Plague that had decimated half of Europe's population was killed off in the city by the fire. The death toll had already started to fall, and new infections were in decline by the time of the fire.



3. London's Lord Mayor believed it insignificant at the time and went back to bed.¹

As London's Lord Mayor arrived at the fire at Farriner's bakery, he was thoroughly unimpressed. The blaze had consumed most of Farriner's home and livelihood, but Sir Thomas Bludworth took one look at the blaze and declared, *Pish! A woman might p**s it out* before returning to bed. Some onlookers were bringing water to try and quench the flames, but most observed, unaware of what was about to unfold.

4. It was seriously hot

The fire itself burned with the intense heat of 1,700 degrees c. In the ten months before the fire, London had experienced an extreme drought. The timber-framed buildings had thoroughly dried, and the combination of a city built of structures that jugged up against one another, basements filled with flammables like oil and turpentine, and countless stables filled with hay: the conditions in London were a perfect combination for untold damage.

5. They didn't have proper buckets or hoses

Those trying to fight the fire were equipped only with small leather buckets, axes, and water squirts.

6. The British Navy fought it using gunpowder

Unable to stop the spread of the fire, the navy exploded buildings in the path of the fire to prevent the spread. In total, the fire covered 1 ½ miles across London.

7. Devastation

70,000 of the 80,000 inhabitants of London had their homes destroyed. 13,200 houses and 87 churches burned down. Officially more people have died falling off the monument to the fire than were recorded as casualties of the event. However, the myth that only six people lost their lives in the fire is another popular misconception.

There's no actual record of how many people died at the time, but eyewitness accounts detail scenes of horror, and when witnesses recounted the event in France, it was implied that the loss of life had been catastrophic. The sad truth is that the majority of those killed were poor, working, or lower-middle-class making records of their deaths and lives very difficult to trace.

8. Insurance companies used the fire as an incentive to start the first fire brigade

Following the fire, insurance companies began offering fire insurance. However, concerned at the consequences should another fire break out (and the extensive costs that it would incur them), they hired their teams of firefighters that would prevent the likelihood of them ever having to payout. This was the first London fire brigade.

9. Thomas Farriner was previously known to the authorities

While Thomas Farriner wasn't prosecuted for starting the fire, it wasn't his first brush with authorities. As a child, Farriner had been found wandering the streets, having escaped from his master. He was detained in the equivalent of a juvenile correctional facility today. After his second detention for running away and several attempts to escape his master, the next record of Thomas shows him in 1629 working as a baker's apprentice.

MOUNT GODWIN-AUSTEN²

The world's second highest mountain (28,245 feet) was at one point named after an early explorer of the area but it was rejected by the Royal



Mt. Godwin-Austen L. S. J. P.



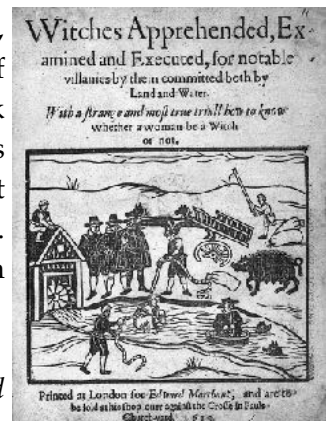
Geographical Society. It was therefore left with the Great Trigonometrical Survey of India's shorthand as **K2** for *Karakoram 2*. The original 1856 sketch by surveyor Thomas Montgomerie is shown on page 2. The Italians conquered the mountain in 1954 but the mountain has a terrible reputation; by 2023, 800 people had climbed to the summit but 96 had died trying.

The south face is shown left with the main route, known as the *Abruzzi Spur*, marked in red. The beneficial side of failure can be read in the life of the remarkable ex-K2 climber Greg Mortenson - *Three Cups of Tea* (Penguin Books

2007); highly recommended.

WITCH³

Between 1450 and 1750 perhaps as many as 100,000 Europeans, about 80% women, were tried for witchcraft - the use of supernatural powers to inflict harm on others. Even some folk healers and midwives were falsely accused. Although it seems to us incredible that people could have believed such accusations, witchcraft has been with us for centuries and across a large variety of ethnic groups. How many folk today believe in astrology or are superstitious enough not to walk under a ladder?



Right, a 1613 English pamphlet showing *Witches apprehended, examined and executed*.

THE SILVER ARROW⁴



The Society of Archers was formed when archery was first becoming a sport. The first meeting took place at Scorton in Yorkshire on 14th May 1673 leading them to boast of being the oldest recorded sporting event.

Shooting takes place for two hours in the morning and two hours in the afternoon with a splendid lunch in between. the *Antient Scorton Silver Arrow* is awarded to the first archer to hit the gold centre. The winner becomes Captain and organises the next annual meeting. The silver arrow was a traditional archery prize; other prizes awarded include a gold-embroidered belt, a silver bugle and a horn spoon.

CORRESPONDENCE

John writes: As a Past-master of the Barbers' Company may I add to your note in Jot & Tittle No.146. I believe it was the Lateran Council of 1215, rather than the Council of Tours 1163, that forbade the clergy to shed blood which I believe meant that they should not fight duels but was interpreted to mean that they could no longer do blood letting for medical reasons. It was this that caused the barbers to take over surgery. Physicians, who were superior and had a degree, were never involved in this. I think that the long and short robe was a French distinction that never applied here. After 1540 when an Act of Parliament united the Barbers' Company with

another company of surgeons there started to be more separation between barbers and surgeons. You are right about the incorporation of the Barbers' company though the date I have is 1462 (which may be caused by the starting date of the year) but the company can trace a reference to its first master in 1308 and has a list of masters since 1375.

HEYTESBURY

I have written before about this Wiltshire village in the pretty Wylve valley between Warminster and Salisbury; principally the Hospital of St John & St Katherine (J&T No.100) and the link between the Wyndham and A'Court families - including Australia's first billionaire, Robert Holmes à Court (J&T No.72).

The market charity bookstall yielded a copy of photographer Sarah Buttenshaw's *Heytesbury: A village in Wiltshire*. Sue and I couldn't wait to walk around the village and talk to the (friendly) local residents - one of whom turned out to be a direct descendant of the Hungerfords that once owned the village. The Barony of Hungerford with the distinction *Heytesbury* entered the peerage in 1526. Their home was primarily at Farley Hungerford Castle.



Heytesbury was the home of Empress Maud whose war with Stephen for the Throne of England became known as *The Anarchy* (1135 - 1153). Later it became a *Rotten Borough* sending two members to parliament and the Manor House, designed by James Wyatt in 1782, was at one time owned by the wealthy WWI poet Siegfried Sassoon (his mother liked Wagner). The photo above is of the 18th century *Blind House*, a dark and claustrophobic cell used to imprison drunks and prostitutes as well as convicted felons on their way to the county gaol.



The building (left), known as Raymond Hall, was the village hall but from the shape you can tell it was at one time an *oast house* for drying grain. During WWI it even became a cinema but today it is simply a private residence. The village was devastated by fire on 12th June 1765, losing 65 dwellings, so there are only a few buildings that predate this time. The structural damage was put at £13,000, probably near £3 million today. An annual event is Bonfire night when an effigy

of Guy Fawkes is locked in the Blind House before being seated on top of a large bonfire. You'd think that a fire is the last form of entertainment wanted by this village!

On the way to Heytesbury we pulled off the main road to the hamlet of Fisherton Delamere for a cup of coffee by the river Wylve. Fisherton appears in the Domesday book and the second name comes from the owners of Nunney Castle in Somerset in the Middle Ages who also owned the village. Ownership then passed to the Paulet family and on to the Dukes of Somerset. William Paulet was Lord Chamberlain and Secretary of State to Henry VIII, and Lord High



Treasurer to Edward VI, Lady Jane Grey, Mary I, and Elizabeth I. The whole area is notable for its mills and the photo (above) was taken from the footbridge where we drank our coffee.

STANMORE⁵

Stanmore is part of the London borough of Harrow although originally part of the county of Middlesex. Here, Bentley Priory was rebuilt in the late 18th century for the first Marquess of Abercorn. It was sold to the Air Ministry in 1925 and became the headquarters of Air Chief Marshal Sir Hugh Dowding during the Battle of Britain.

Some two miles west along Grimsdyke (Saxon earthwork) lies Grims Dyke a Victorian pile owned by William Schwenk Gilbert of Gilbert & Sullivan fame, along with his wife Lucy and two ring-tailed lemurs. It was designed by Norman Shaw, responsible for New Scotland Yard. Gilbert designed the garden which included a lake with an island. He would bathe in the lake every day and on 29th May 1911 he invited two local girls to join him. However, one got into difficulties and Gilbert dived in and brought her to shore. Unfortunately, such strenuous effort was too much for his heart and he died of a heart attack.



He is buried in St John's church. Charles Fortnum of Fortnum & Mason lived in Stanmore as did the composer Handel. Nowadays Stanmore is known for its more recent local residents: Roger

Moore, Michael Portillo, Barbara Windsor, Charlotte Rampling, Clive Anderson and Anthony Horowitz.

BYNG-OH

In May 1756 the British feared a French attack on their Balearic Islands' Menorca base. By the time Admiral John Byng and his small fleet arrived the base had fallen. He attacked in a very half-hearted way and was easily driven



off so fearing he was facing insuperable odds he headed back to Gibraltar. The Prime Minister, Thomas Pelham-Holles, Duke of Newcastle was furious and ordered Byng's court martial. The result was a forgone conclusion as the PM announced *he shall be tried immediately; he shall be hanged directly*. Poor Byng was tried and convicted on his own flagship and shot by a squad of marines⁶. In his famous *Candide*, Voltaire observed *In this country (England) it's good to kill an admiral from time to time to encourage the others*.

HOLY MOLY⁷



St Catherine's day is celebrated on April 30th. Catherine of Sienna, the daughter of a dyer, was overly religious even as a child and vowed to stay a virgin at the age of 7. She endured bitter persecution for refusing to marry and entered the *Mantellate*, the Third Order of St Dominic, at the age of fifteen. She gained the attention of the Pope and travelled around Italy under his authority, persuading rebellious cities to the obedience of the Holy See.

In the face of the whole world she sought out Gregory XI in Avignon and persuaded him to return to Rome where popes had not resided since 1309. Catherine the mystic died in 1380 at Rome at the age of 33, where she was found to carry the *stigmata* (bodily marks corresponding to those of the crucified Jesus Christ). She was canonised in 1461 and made a Doctor of the Church in 1970. By the way, the catherine-wheel firework is associated with another St Catherine - that of Alexandria.

SPIT AND SAWDUST⁸

The original definition of a pint was the combined volume of 32 mouthfuls of fluid spat into a container. A line was then painted to mark the level. *Pint* comes from the Latin *pingere*, meaning painted. This figure was multiplied/divided for other sizes: 2 mouthfuls to the *pony*, 4 to the *jack*, 8 to the *jill* (gill), 16 to the *cup*, 64 to the *quart*, 128 to the *pottle* and 256 to the *gallon* 16,384 to the *hogshead* and 32,768 to the *butt*. It could also be used for dry measure: 512 to the *peck*, 1,024 to the *kenning*, 2,048 to the *bushel*, 4096 to the *strike* and 8,192 to the *coomb* - you would need to drink a lot of beer to spit that much!

1. The Great Fire of 1666 by Lieve Verschuer, courtesy of Museum of Fine Arts Budapest.
2. Wikipedia
3. Historical Association.
4. Courtesy of *The English Year* by Steve Roud, Penguin Books 2006.
5. From *I never knew that about England* by Christopher Winn, Ebury Press 2005. Photo courtesy of Harrow On-line.
6. *The execution of Admiral Byng*, 14 March 1757 courtesy of Royal Museums Greenwich.
7. *Catherine of Sienna* by Giovanni Battista Tiepolo, Kunshistorisches Museum Wien (Vienna), in the Public Domain.
8. *The Long and the Short of It*, Graeme Donald, Michael O'Mara Books 2016. *Spit and sawdust* dates back to when basic pubs had sawdust on the floor for patrons to spit on.