
Opening Extract from...

Johnson's Life of London

The People Who Made the City That Made the World

Written by Boris Johnson

Published by HarperPress

BORIS JOHNSON

JOHNSON'S LIFE OF LONDON

THE PEOPLE WHO MADE THE CITY THAT MADE THE WORLD

Harper Press

Harper*Press*
An imprint of HarperCollins*Publishers*
77–85 Fulham Palace Road
Hammersmith, London W6 8JB
www.harpercollins.co.uk

Published in Great Britain by Harper*Press* in 2011

1

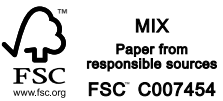
Boris Johnson asserts the moral right to
be identified as the author of this work

A catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library

HB ISBN: 978-0-00-741893-0
TPB ISBN: 978-0-00-745733-5

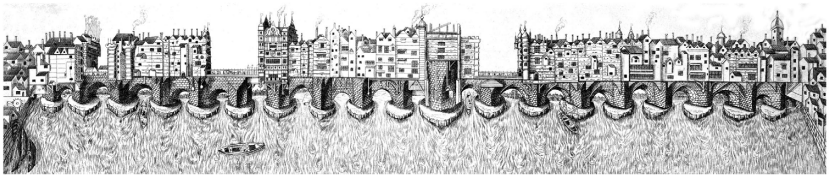
Illustrations on page vii © Museum of London;
pages iii, 24, 47, 74, 305 © Getty Images

Typeset by G&M Designs Limited,
Raunds, Northamptonshire
Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc



For Marina

Contents



London Bridge

Still they come, surging towards me across the bridge.

On they march in sun, wind, rain, snow and sleet. Almost every morning I cycle past them in rank after heaving rank as they emerge from London Bridge station and tramp tramp tramp up and along the broad 239-metre pavement that leads over the river and towards their places of work.

It feels as if I am reviewing an honourable regiment of yomping commuters, and as I pass them down the bus-rutted tarmac there is the occasional eyes left moment and I will be greeted with a smile or perhaps a cheery four-letter cry.

Sometimes they are on the phone, or talking to their neighbours, or checking their texts. A few of them may glance at the scene, which is certainly worth a glance: on their left the glistening turrets of the City, on the right the white Norman keep, the guns of HMS *Belfast* and the mad castellations of Tower Bridge, and beneath them the powerful swirling eddies of the river that seems to be green or brown depending on the time of day. Mainly, however, they have their mouths set and eyes with that blank and inward look of people who have done the bus or the Tube or the overground train and are steeling themselves for the day ahead.

This was the sight, you remember, that filled TS Eliot with horror. A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many, reported the sensitive banker-turned-poet. I had not thought death had undone so many, he

moaned; and yet ninety years after Eliot freaked out the tide of humanity is fuller than ever. When I pass that pavement at off-peak times I can see that it is pale and worn from the pounding, and that not even the chewing gum can survive the wildebeest tread.

The crowd has changed since Eliot had his moment of apocalypse. There are thousands of women on the march today, wearing trainers and carrying their heels in bags. The men have rucksacks instead of briefcases; no one is wearing a bowler hat and hardly anyone seems to be smoking a cigarette, let alone a pipe. But London's commuters are still the same in their trudging purpose, and they come in numbers not seen before.

London's buses are carrying more people than at any time in history. The Tube is travelling more miles than ever, and more people are riding on the trains. It would be nice to reveal that people are ditching their cars in favour of public transport; and yet the paradox is that private motor vehicle transport is also increasing, and cycling has gone up 15 per cent in one year.

As we look back at the last twenty years of the information technology revolution, there is one confident prediction that has not come true.

They said we would all be sitting in our kitchens in Dorking or Dorset and 'telecottaging' down the 'information superhighway'. Video link-ups, we were told, would make meetings unnecessary. What tosh.

Whatever we may think they 'need' to do, people want to see other people up close. I leave it to the anthropologists to come up with the detailed analysis, but you only have to try a week of 'working from home' to know it is not all it's cracked up to be.

You soon get gloomy from making cups of coffee and surfing the Internet and going to hack at that piece of cheese in the fridge. And then there are some profounder reasons for this obstinate human desire to be snuffling round each other at the water cooler. As the Harvard economist Edward Glaeser has demonstrated, the move to the city is as rational in the information revolution as it was in the Industrial Revolution.

By the time I get to cycle home, most of the morning crowds have tramped the other way. Like some gigantic undersea coelenterate, London has completed its spectacular daily act of respiration – sucking in millions of commuters from 7 am to 9 am, and then efficiently expelling them back to the suburbs and the Home Counties from 5 pm to 7 pm. But the drift home is more staggered. There are pubs, clubs and bars to be visited and as I watch the crowds of drinkers on the pavements – knots of people dissolving and reforming in a slow minuet – I can see why the city beats the countryside hands down. It's the sheer range of opportunity.

You can exchange Dante/Beatrice glances on the Tube escalator; you can spill someone else's latte and offer to buy them another; you can apologise when they tread on your toe, or you can get your dog lead tangled in theirs, or you can just collide with them on the pavement. You can even use the personal dating services in the evening paper or (I imagine this still goes on) you can offer to buy them a drink. These are some of the mating strategies of our species; but they have statistically a far higher likelihood of success in a city, because it is in the city where there are the numbers and the choice of potential mates – and the penalty for failure is much lower.

The metropolis is like a vast multinational reactor where Mr Quark and Miss Neutrino are moving the fastest and bumping into each other with the most exciting results. This is not just a question of romance or reproduction. It is about ideas. It is about the cross-pollination that is more likely to take place with a whole superswarm of bees rather than a few isolated hives.

You would expect me to say this, and I must of course acknowledge that many great cities can make all kinds of claims to primacy, but at a moment when it is perhaps excessively fashionable to be gloomy about Western civilisation I would tentatively suggest that London is just about the most culturally, technologically, politically and linguistically influential city of the last five hundred years. In fact, I don't think even the Mayors of Paris, New York, Moscow, Berlin, Madrid, Tokyo, Beijing or Amsterdam would quibble when I say that London

is – after Athens and Rome – the third most programmatic city in history.

Around the world there are similar crowds of commuters, tramping similar pavements with the same grim-jawed mood of economic competitiveness. They are wearing a London invention – the dark suit, with jacket, trousers and tie, that was pioneered by eighteenth-century dandies and refined by the Victorians. They travel on devices that were either invented or developed in London: underground trains (Paddington to Farringdon, 1855) or buses, or even bicycles, which were certainly popularised if not invented in London.

If they have just got off a plane, that machine will have been guided through the sky by air traffic controllers who are trained to speak a language that emerged in its modern form in the London of Geoffrey Chaucer.

They may make use of a cash machine (Enfield, 1967) before entering a department store (which appeared in its modern form in Oxford Street in 1909). When they get home the chances are they will slump in front of a television (the first example of which was turned on in a room above what is now Bar Italia in Frith Street, Soho, in 1925) and watch the football (whose rules were codified in a pub in Great Queen Street in 1863).

You know, I could keep it up for quite a while, this tub-thumping list of London innovations, from the machine gun to the Internet to the futures market for Château Haut-Brion. But the city's contribution has also been spiritual and ideological. When Anglican missionaries fanned out across Africa, they carried the King James Bible, a masterpiece translated in London. When the Americans founded their great republic they were partly inspired by the anti-monarchical slogans of London radicals; and across the world there are governments that at least pay lip service to concepts of parliamentary democracy and habeas corpus that London did more than any other city to promote.

Darwinism originated in the English capital. So did Marxism. So did Thatcherism, come to that, and the anarcho-communism of Bromley resident Peter Kropotkin.

It was the vast pink patches of empire that did the most to allow Londoners to project themselves abroad, the Cambrian explosion of Victorian technology and energy. But the empire was no accident, and it was no sudden fluke that made London in 1800 the biggest and most powerful city on Earth. That imperial epoch was itself the product of centuries of evolution, and the Victorians inherited a conglomerate of advantages – a wonderfully flexible language, skill in banking, naval expertise, a stable political system – that previous Londoners had laid down.

A big city gives people the chance to find mates, money and food; and then there is one further thing that bright people come to London to find, one currency more dear to the human heart than money itself – and that is fame.

It was the eternal contest for reputation and prestige that encouraged Londoners to endow new hospitals or write great plays or crack the problem of longitude for the navy. No matter how agreeable your surroundings, you couldn't get famous by sitting around in some village, and that is still true today. You need people to acknowledge what you have done; you need a gallery for the applause; and above all you need to know what everyone else is up to.

It is the city that gives the ambitious person the scope to eavesdrop, borrow or just intuit the ideas of others, and then to meld them with his own and come up with something new. And for the less ambitious, it is a chance to look busy and ingratiate yourself with the boss in the hope of avoiding the boot – because if someone is 'working from home' then I am afraid they are a great deal easier to sack.

These are some of the reasons why people have chosen not to stay at home with the cat; that is why there is the drumming migration over London Bridge. For centuries people have been coming not in search of oil or gold or any other natural wealth – because London has nothing but Pleistocene clay and mud – they have been coming in search of each other, and each other's approbation. It is that competition for prestige that has so often produced the flashes of genius that have taken the city forwards – and sometimes the entire human race.

If you had come to London 10,000 years ago, you would have found nothing to distinguish the place from any other estuarial swamp in Europe. You might have found the odd mammoth looking lost and on the verge of extinction, but no human settlements. And for the next 10,000 years it was pretty much the same.

The civilisations of Babylon and Mohenjo-daro rose and fell. The Pharaohs built the pyramids. Homer sang. The Mexican Zapotecs began to write. Pericles adorned the Acropolis. The Chinese emperor called his terracotta army into being, the Roman republic endured a bloody civil war and then became an empire and in London there was silence save the flitting of deer between the trees.

The river was about four times wider than it is today, and much slower – but there was scarcely a coracle to be seen on the Thames. When the time came for Christ to preach his ministry in Galilee there were certainly a few proto-Britons living in a state of undress and illiteracy. But there were no Londoners. There was no big or lasting habitation on the site of the modern city, because there was no possibility of a settlement – not without that vital piece of transport infrastructure I use every day.

By my calculations, today's London Bridge must be the twelfth or thirteenth incarnation of a structure that has been repeatedly bashed, broken, burned or bombed. It has been used to hurl witches into the Thames; it has been destroyed by Vikings; it has been torched at least twice by mobs of angry peasants.

In its time the Bridge I use every day has sustained churches, houses, Elizabethan palaces, a mall of about two hundred shops and businesses as well as the spiked and blackened heads of enemies of the state.

The previous dilapidated version was sold in 1967 – in one of the most magnificent examples of London's protean talent for export – to an American entrepreneur called Robert P McCulloch. He paid $2.46 million for the structure, and everyone laughed behind their hands because they assumed that poor Mr McCulloch had confused London Bridge with the more picturesque Tower Bridge; and yet the Missouri chainsaw tycoon was not as foolish as he seemed.

The bridge has been re-assembled stone by stone in Lake Havasu, Arizona, where it is the second most visited tourist attraction after the Grand Canyon; and the fascination is deserved, I would say, given the utter indispensability of London Bridge in the creation of London.

It was the bridge which created the port; it was the toll booth on the north side that necessitated the guards, and the guards that necessitated the first housing. It was the Romans, in about 43 AD or soon thereafter, who built the first pontoon bridge.

It was a bunch of pushy Italian immigrants who founded London, and seventeen years later the boneheaded ancient Britons responded to this gift of civilisation by burning London to the ground, destroying the bridge, and massacring everyone they could find.

Boudica

Who goaded the Romans to invest

It must have happened about here, I reckon. It is a bright autumn day, and I have found what could well have been the heart of the earliest Roman settlement. It's just up from London Bridge, at the junction between Gracechurch Street and Lombard Street, with Fenchurch Street running off to the right.

There's a Marks & Spencer and an Itsu restaurant ahead, but according to all my books the space I am interested in is now occupied by a yellow box junction at the crossroads.

So I risk a few toots from the motorists by cycling on to the spot; and my mind empties as in a trance; and I no longer see the shiny new banks and accountancy firms, but half-built wooden homes, the smoke from a thousand new hearths shimmering over all and new unsurfaced roads and a forest in the distance; and just before I scoot away again I imagine what it must have been like to be in the hobnailed sandals of poor exhausted Suetonius Paulinus, the governor of the new province.

He had just marched as fast as his troops could go, down what is now the A5 from North Wales, down the Edgware Road, down Cheapside, and now he stood on the patch of gravel that served as the marketplace for the very first London. Before him there was a collection of London merchants, in a state of terror.

They knew what had happened to the people of Colchester in Essex – thousands of them sliced by sharp Celtic swords or skewered on pikes or burned alive in their wattle dwellings; the very temple of the deified Claudius sacked and burned to the ground, its occupants carbonised. They had heard all about the ferocity of the Iceni and their queen, Boudica. They had heard what a big and indignant woman she was, with her mane of red hair and her determination to avenge the rape of her daughters by Roman troops.

Help us, Suetonius, they begged the Roman general; and the miserable fellow shook his head. As he looked at early Londinium, he could see the ambition of the settlers everywhere. Colchester (Camulodunum) was officially the colonia or capital, but London was already the most populous centre, an entrepôt town, as Tacitus describes it, swarming with business folk and travellers of all kinds.

If Suetonius looked to his right, down to the bridge, he could see ships tied up at the dock: unloading marble from Turkey to beautify the sprouting new homes, or olive oil from Provence or fish sauce from Spain. He could see ships loading the very first exports of this country – hunting dogs or tin or gold or depressed-looking woad-stained slaves from the dank forests of Essex.

All around he could see the signs of the speculative money that had been poured into the town. Just in front of him, we now believe, was a new shopping mall with a portico 58 metres long, and he could see women with their heads covered, haggling by some scales, and pigs snuffling in rubbish. There were piles of fresh timbers being laid out, so that proper square Roman buildings could replace the primitive round huts of the earliest years. There were fresh hazel laths for the wattle, fresh clay for the daub. There were carpenters who had been hired for the work, not all of whom had been paid. The roads through London were already done to a professional Roman standard, nine metres wide and constructed of hard-rammed gravel, cambered at the side to allow rainwater to drain off into ditches.

There were about thirty thousand of these Londoners in an area roughly the size of Hyde Park, and when I say Londoners I don't mean

cockneys, obviously. They weren't Brits: indeed, they would have been pretty contemptuous of the 'Britunculi' – the little Britons, as one Roman legionary was later to call them.

They were Romans, Latin-speaking traders in togas or tunics, from what is now France, Spain, Germany, Turkey, the Balkans – from all over the empire. They had expensive Roman tastes, for wine and red *terra sigillata* crockery, with its pretty moulded reliefs. Even in this misty outpost, they liked to lie back on their couches and toast each other in gorgeous glass goblets from Syria.

It all cost money, and they had got badly into debt; and that, at root, was the cause of the disaster that was about to enfold them.

I'm sorry, Suetonius said to the hand-wringing deputation, we can't stay; we can't risk it. He just didn't have the numbers. The Roman general's troops were knackered, their feet flayed by the march from Wales. He could call upon a maximum force of about ten thousand from the whole island. Boudica and the Iceni already had about one hundred and twenty thousand and more were flocking to the banner of revolt.

These legionaries were no wimps, mind you: Germans, Serbs, Dutch, capable of going for days on nothing but hard tack and water, and then throwing a pontoon bridge across a river. But they knew how Boudica's troops had carved up Petilius Cerealis and the 9th Legion, and understandably they didn't fancy it themselves. So Suetonius did what it pained a Roman to do more than anything else.

He ordered a strategic retreat, back up what is now the Edgware Road, taking with him everybody who could walk and who wanted to come. Those who stayed included the old, the infirm, and women who were scared of marching through the forests, and merchants who just couldn't face abandoning their investments.

For a few hours London had that eerie feeling of a Wild West town awaiting revenge: flapping awnings, and people peering through the casements at the deserted streets. We have some archaeological vignettes of the panic. In Eastcheap it looks as though someone grabbed a pot made in Lyons and then stuffed it with four finger-ring intaglio gems before grubbing it into the earth.

In a house in what is now King William Street, someone took seventeen coins, mainly bearing the head of Claudius, put them in a little red-glazed bowl and stuffed them in a corner. Others no doubt prayed, and sacrificed animals (we have the bones of a goat) and fondled the sooty little clay figurines of their household gods.

At length there was a rumble in what is now the Bishopsgate area.

Whooping down the branch-strewn track in their wickerwork horse-drawn war chariots came the Iceni warriors and their queen. She was a tremendous sight, according to Dio Cassius: very tall, with a harsh voice, and always wearing a multicoloured tunic, and with a great big one-kilo necklace – a torc – made of thick twisted strands of gold. She had a bosom so big that she was capable of using it to conceal her prophetic hare, an animal she would whisk out at the end of her bellicose speeches, and which she would invoke, depending on whether it ran to the left or the right, to foretell the outcome of battle. Within that bosom was a heart set on mayhem.

Far below the streets of modern London we are still unearthing the traces of the Boudican holocaust – a red layer of burned debris about forty-five centimetres thick. They set the first fires somewhere near Gracechurch Street, where Suetonius met the Londoners; and as the defenceless citizens ran from their homes the Celts chopped off their heads or slaughtered them in the Walbrook, the malodorous stream that ran between the two low hills – now Cornhill and Ludgate – that comprised early London.

They hanged, they burned and they crucified with a headlong fury, says Tacitus; while according to Dio Cassius they took the noblest and most beautiful women, stripped them and cut off their breasts and then sewed these breasts to their mouths so that they appeared to be eating them. They even profaned the graveyards, and evidence from excavations in the City of London seems to indicate that they exhumed the corpse of an old man and stuck the head of a young woman between his legs.

They went over the bridge and burned the buildings in what is now Southwark, while in the centre of town the buildings collapsed together

in a single conflagration and a column of smoke rose to the heavens. Barely seventeen years after it was founded, London was destroyed.

By the time she had finished doing the same to St Albans, Boudica had killed seventy thousand people, claims Tacitus. That may be on the high side, but in proportional terms she was still more destructive of London and Londoners than the Black Death, the Great Fire, or Hermann Goering. In an act of incredible nihilism, she attacked the entire commercial infrastructure of Britannia – the very trade nexus the Iceni needed themselves.

They sold horses to the invaders; they depended on Roman custom. Boudica's late husband Prasutagus was almost certainly a Roman citizen – and so, by extension, was Boudica. You have to wonder why she was so furious as to act in this apparently self-defeating way. The answer is that the Romans had behaved with diabolical stupidity.

When Prasutagus died, he had hoped to keep his East Anglian kingdom in the family, by leaving half to his daughters and half to the Emperor Nero. Whether or not they were following the orders of Nero the matricidal despot, the Roman administration decided to expropriate all Iceni possessions. The chief tax collector or procurator was one Catus Decianus – an arrogant twerp – who sent his centurions to Thetford, where Prasutagus and Boudica had lived in their kraal of concentric ditches and ramparts.

They laid hands on the queen of the Iceni; they cudgelled her milk-white Celtic skin and raped her daughters, and then, most stupidly of all, they humiliated the Iceni elite by robbing them of their property and enslaving the relatives of the dead king. It was this humiliation, and the Roman greed, that enraged the Iceni, and the next question, therefore, is why did the Romans behave so badly? It is all there, surely, in the text of Tacitus. It was primarily an economic fiasco.

When Claudius invaded Britain in AD 43, he was a stuttering pedant in search of military glory, and he was going against historic Roman advice. Britain, said most Roman experts, was a dump, and a scary dump at that. When Julius Caesar had led his first inconclusive expedition, a century earlier, he had found the place so poor and wretched that

there was nothing worth taking. Don't bother going beyond the existing northern boundaries, said the Emperor Augustus, it's like fishing with a golden hook: the prize isn't worth the tackle.

The Brits were said to swim in mud, and to have weird Maori-style tattoos of shapes and animals which they liked to exhibit on their half-naked bodies – like modern football fans – for all to see. Ovid said they were green. Martial said they were blue. Some said they were half-human and half-animal. Going to Britain was like a moon shot, in other words: you did it for glory rather than as an investment.

So when Claudius arrived on his elephants, and found himself accepting the surrender of British kings – with hardly any Roman losses – it must have been a tremendous moment for Roman pride. His general Aulus Plautius had expertly solved the problem that had defeated all previous inhabitants of this country, and built the bridge.

The bridge opened up the rest of Britain to people coming from the south coast, and soon London was a boom town. The population shot up; prices rose; people needed to finance the houses they wanted to build and the shops they hoped to open. So they turned to the financiers, and the bankers piled in.

Nero's tutor Seneca made a loan of forty million sesterces for commercial development in Britain, and when you consider that a legionary was paid only nine hundred sesterces a year, you can see that this was a huge sum of money. The trouble was that the British investments did not pay off – or not fast enough for the bankers. It cost a lot to build the gleaming white temple of Claudius at Colchester, and to finance the port and shopping arcade of London.

The repayments weren't enough; the loans were going bad and Catus Decianus the procurator started behaving like a real swine: whacking up the taxes on local people, kicking the natives out of their homes, and ultimately trying to despoil the Iceni of their land and property.

The position of the Britons is well summed up by the first ever image we have of Britannia, a carving from Aphrodisias in Turkey. It shows a bare-breasted woman being subdued from behind by Claudius in helmet and cuirass. She has a faintly cross-eyed expression, and in the

words of Professor Miranda Aldhouse-Green of Cardiff University, 'one has the disturbing feeling that he is about to bugger her'.

To put it in today's language, the ordinary people of Britain were paying the price for a series of unwise property speculations, in which the borrowers and the bankers were both culpable. It wasn't the first time it had happened in the Roman Empire, and it wasn't the last time it was to happen in London.

In her own way, and at one remove, you could say that Boudica was the first banker-basher to hit the Square Mile. She was also at the beginning of what was to become a grand London tradition of female leaders. There is evidence that the early Britons were accustomed to strong female figures: Cartimandua, queen of the Brigantes, gave her menfolk a very tough time.

Then look at Elizabeth's great pre-Armada speech at Tilbury, all about having the body of a poor weak woman but the heart and stomach of a man. It's pure Boudica. Or look at Victoria, with her tartan cloak and brooch. There is more than a hint of the queen of the Iceni.

Or look, dare I say it, at Margaret Thatcher, with her blonde hair, staring eye, harsh voice and firm views about national sovereignty. These days we identify Boudica so closely with London-based national heroines that we get into a muddle about what actually happened.

If you go to Westminster Bridge, you can see the famous 1884 sculpture of the outraged bare-breasted battleaxe and her poor raped daughters, framed against the sky in their scythe-wheeled war chariot. On the pediment are some lines from 'Boudica an ode', a popular poem by the eighteenth-century poet William Cowper:

'Regions Caesar never knew
Thy posterity shall sway,
Where his eagles never flew,
None invincible as they'

Cowper's point is that Boudica had the last laugh on Rome. It was her 'posterity' – her British descendants – who went on to found an empire

vaster than Caesar's. Which is all very patriotic and consoling, but completely untrue.

After she had sacked St Albans, Boudica went off to the Midlands where on some as yet unidentified plain she was finally and decisively routed by Suetonius Paulinus, whose troops, disciplined and refreshed, overcame odds of 20–1.

Boudica either died of dysentery or poisoned herself; and no, she is not buried under a platform at King's Cross station. Contrary to what Cowper says, her defeat was so total that her language was almost completely wiped out, and her Celtic posterity was driven very largely to the fringes of Britain, while the British Empire was eventually ruled in a language that owed much more to that of Suetonius Paulinus than to that of Boudica.

The greatest thing Boudica did for London was so to shock and infuriate the Romans that it became a matter of prestige to win the province back and to assert Londinium's status as an ever more glorious and important centre.

It was thanks to Boudica's banker-bashing aggression that the Romans rebuilt London – to an extent that archaeologists have only recently begun to appreciate – as one of the biggest and most populous cities of the northern part of the Empire. It was Claudius' quest for prestige that led to London's foundation, and one of the most impressive spurts of construction began when it was announced that the Emperor Hadrian was on his way.