The History of the River Fleet

Compiled by

The UCL River Fleet Restoration Team

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Contents

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'There are also round London, on the northern side, in the suburbs, excellent springs; the water of which is sweet, clear and salubrious, "mid glistening pebbles gliding playfully", amongst which Holywell, Clerkenwell and St Clement's Well are of the most note, and frequently visited, as well by the scholars from the schools, as by the youth of the city when they go out to take the air in the summer evenings."[1]

1 Overview

1.1 Etymology

The River Fleet has had many names throughout its history providing useful clues to its importance in the development of London. The name 'Fleet' is thought to be from the Anglo-Saxon meaning a tidal inlet that is capable of floating a boat and strictly therefore should only be applied to the lower reaches below Holborn bridge. It is thought that Kentish Town derives its name from the Ken-ditch- 'Ken' or 'Caen' being the Celtic word for green and 'ditch' referring to the Fleet. Further downstream, the river was known as the Hole-bourne ('stream in the hollow') in reference to its deep valley and was also known as the 'River of Wells' because of the large number of Wells in its catchment. The importance of the river in the lower reaches as a source of power also led to the river being called 'Turnmill Brook'. As the river became more polluted and the flow decreased, the river became known as first a 'brook', then a 'ditch' and finally a 'drain'.

1.2 The source of the River

The top of the Hampstead-Highgate massif is 443 feet above Sea Level. A permeable layer of sand and gravel lies at the top of the hill which is about 80 feet thick at the summit; beneath this lies a slightly permeable layer of sandy-clay which is about 50 feet thick; under this is approximately 500 feet of London Clay, a very impermeable layer. Water escapes from the hill on all sides between the top two layers giving rise to an abundance of springs and wells in the area. Historically this was an important source of potable water for the City of London and many conduits and well heads were built to convey the water south along the Fleet valley. It is important to remember that it is not just the Fleet that takes its source at Parliament Hill: the Kilburn, a tributary of the Westbourne, the Tyburn and the Brent Rivers also begin here.

Further down the river, the impermeable clay gave rise to many small rivulets and springs all of which in time joined the river. While these gradually dried up as their catchment became increasingly urbanised, it is important to remember that these too were sources of the Fleet River.

1.3 Uses of the River

Of all the Lost Rivers of London the Fleet was both the largest and the most important. Not only were the springs in its valley an important source of potable water, but its flow provided power before the advent of fossil fuels. Even as late as 1750 there was still a snuff-mill powered by the river on Kings Cross Road.[2] The river was also a vital transport corridor into Northern

[1] William Fitzstephen, "Description of London," in *Vita Sancti Thomae*, (1180).

[2] Nicholas Barton, *The Lost Rivers of London* Revised Edition edn (London: Historical Publications,

London– an anchor was found as far north as Kentish Town road- and enabled heavy cargoes to be moved with relative ease. The earliest recorded incidence was the transportation of stone for the construction of old St Paul's Cathedral in 1110-1133. However, perhaps the most well known use of the Fleet throughout its history has been its use as a sewer. Although this was widely discouraged by the authorities as it caused the river to both silt up and smell, waste (particularly from the meat markets and nearby tanneries) was consistently thrown into the river throughout its history. As early as 1290 the monks of Whitefriars, who lived several hundred yards away from the river, complained to the King of the 'putrid exhalations of the Fleet' which overpowered the incense at mass.

The river was famed for its stench: In an early play there is the line 'I was just dead of a consumption, till the sweet smoke of Cheapside and the dear perfume of Fleet Ditch made me a man again.'[3]
In 1710 Swift writes of the Fleet:

"Now from all parts the swelling kennels flow,
And bear their trophies with them as they go;
Filths of all hues and odours seem to tell
What street they sail'd from by their sight and smell.
They, as each torrent drives, with rapid force,
From Smithfield to St. 'Pulchre's shape their course,
And in huge confluence join'd at Snow Hill ridge,
Fall from the conduit prone to Holborn Bridge;
Sweepings from butchers' stalls, dung, guts, and blood,
Drown'd puppies, stinking sprats, all drench'd in mud,
Dead cats, and turnip-tops, come tumbling down the flood."

In 1815 parliament relaxed the controls on disposal into the river in an attempt to solve the problem of leaking cess-pits polluting water supplies. The water quality in the river rapidly deteriorated. It was particularly the polluted state of the river that led to it being enclosed during the sanitation-aware mid-19th Century. The state of the Fleet was blamed during that time for several outbreaks of disease including an outbreak of Cholera in Clerkenwell Prison in 1832 while works were being done on the sewer.

1.4 Flooding

Even before the Fleet was enclosed in an engineered system, the height of the river was known to change rapidly and with it cause a great deal of problems. The reason for this is probably mainly due to the impermeability of the London Clay in the river basin (i.e. all the rainfall falling in the catchment must run off over the surface). However, the increased constriction of the river by buildings etc. within the lower reaches is likely to have exasperated the problem. It is interesting how many historians note the gradual decline of the base flow of the river throughout the history of London but that the force of the river in flood has not noticeably decreased.

1992).
[3] Walter Thornbury, "The Fleet River and Fleet Ditch ," in *Old and New London: Volume 2*, (British History Online, 1878), pp. 416-426.

In 1317 a long drought was broken by an enormous thunderstorm. The resulting flood caused serious damage to both Holborn and Fleet bridges in the city. The area between St Pancras and King's Cross and around Ray St was particularly liable to flooding as these were quite low-lying areas. In the 13th century the persistent flooding at St Pancras Wash was already leading to the migration of the parishioners to the relatively drier Kentish Town.[4]

In 1768 a severe storm resulted in the river covering Bagnigge Wells (on King's Cross Road) with four feet of water and carried off three cattle and several pigs. There were serious floods here in 1809 and 1818; in the latter the water rose several feet in the night. In 1846 a violent thunderstorm caused the then enclosed river to quite literally blow up. A boat was smashed against one of the piers of Blackfriars Bridge and cellars in Farringdon Street were flooded. The most damage, however, was done in Clerkenwell where the river still ran above ground. As well as furniture and cattle, three poor houses were carried off by the tide. The road at King's Cross was impassable. A few days later another storm renewed the flood and two more houses were destroyed. Even in 1862, after the river had been completely enclosed in the area, the river burst out of its pipe during the construction of the Metropolitan Railway at King's Cross and caused a great deal of damage.

1.5 Maintenance of the River

As mentioned previously, the use of the river as a sewer combined with the natural sediment carried from its higher reaches, caused the river to silt up rapidly and reduced the flow. As far back as 1307, Henry Earl of Lincoln complained to the King that the river was no longer navigable as in former times. In 1502, 1606 and 1652 the river was scoured out to remove the rubbish caused 'by the throwing in of offal and other garbage by butchers, saucemen, and others'.[5]

After the Great Fire, Christopher Wren and the Surveyor Robert Hooke turned the river below Holborn Bridge into the 'New Canal' at a cost of £50,000. The canal was 2100 ft in length and 50 ft wide with 30 ft wide wharves on either side. The bridges had high arches in order to allow the passage of boats and contained storage vaults under their ramps. Once again, the river was deepened but even as they were building the new development, the canal began to silt up with both mud and rubbish thrown in by the local residents. To resolve this, a 15' grate was installed at Holborn Bridge. However, this had the effect of creating a wall of rubbish over which the water cascaded.

Although the New Canal was built at a reasonable cost, it made little money once in operation. In the first three years it earned a miserable £60 p.a. from charges to vessels and the canal was soon sold off to a local businessman. Under his ownership the canal fell into disrepair. Its wharves, however, became important thoroughfares at a time when road space was at a premium.
In 1733 the section between Holborn and Fleet Bridges was covered to make

[4] John Richardson, *A History of Camden* First edn (London: Historical Publications, 1999).
[5] Nicholas Barton, *The Lost Rivers of London* Revised Edition edn (London: Historical Publications, 1992).

way for the displaced market from the Mansion House. In 1766 the remainder of the canal was covered over during the construction of the first Blackfriars Bridge.

Although the canal was not a commercial success, it did succeed in greatly improving the surrounding area. For a long time it had been known as an area of poverty and squalor with many unsavoury residents including, in 1374, Robert Duke of Brampton who terrorised the inhabitants at night by shooting arrows at them. After the building of the canal, this was all swept away, and although it is unlikely that the river looked as romantic as Samuel Scott would have us believe, it certainly became a much cleaner and more beautiful stretch of the river.

Figure 1: The Mouth of the River Fleet c. 1740 by Samuel Scott *(Guildhall Library)*

1.6 Enclosure of the River

As mentioned previously, the New Canal was the first serious length of the Fleet to be enclosed. It was shortly followed by the section of the river between King's Cross and St Pancras Old Church. The building of the Regent's Canal to the north further extended the enclosure but more north of here the river remained uncovered until the 1860s. Further downstream at Bagnigge Wells and Clerkenwell, the river was still uncovered until the 1840s, even though by that time the area was densely populated and the river was more polluted than ever with human waste.

The creation of the Metropolitan Board of Works in 1855 led to a transformation of the Fleet in its now enclosed form. The three northern intercepting sewers designed by Bazalgette all link in to the Fleet Sewer. The High Level Sewer joins to the Fleet tributaries at Hampstead and Highgate; the Mid-Level Sewer is connected through a complex intersection of pipes at Clerkenwell Road; the Low-Level Sewer catches the remainder of the flow on the Embankment under Blackfriars Bridge. Here Bazalgette designed a

complex series of chambers with an emergency outflow into the Thames should the volume of water be too great and the tide in the river be low.

The Fleet Storm Relief Sewer was built in the 1870s in order to give extra capacity to the Fleet Sewer in high flow events. Figure 2 and Figure 3 show the location (and some dimensions) of these sewers in 1905. It is clear that the Fleet Sewer in this section follows the historic route of the river, passing up Farringdon Road and alongside Mt Pleasant Sorting Office. However, following in the footsteps of earlier modifications of the river, this path is still a 'rationalised' version of the course.

The arching over the lower sections provided an interesting source of 18th Century urban myth concerning underground pigs. The story first appeared in the Gentleman's Magazine on the 24th August 1736:
"A fatter boar was hardly ever seen than one taken up this day, coming out of the Fleet ditch into the Thames. It proved to be a butcher's near Smithfield Bars, who had missed him five months, all which time he had been in the common sewer, and was improved in price from ten shillings to two guineas."

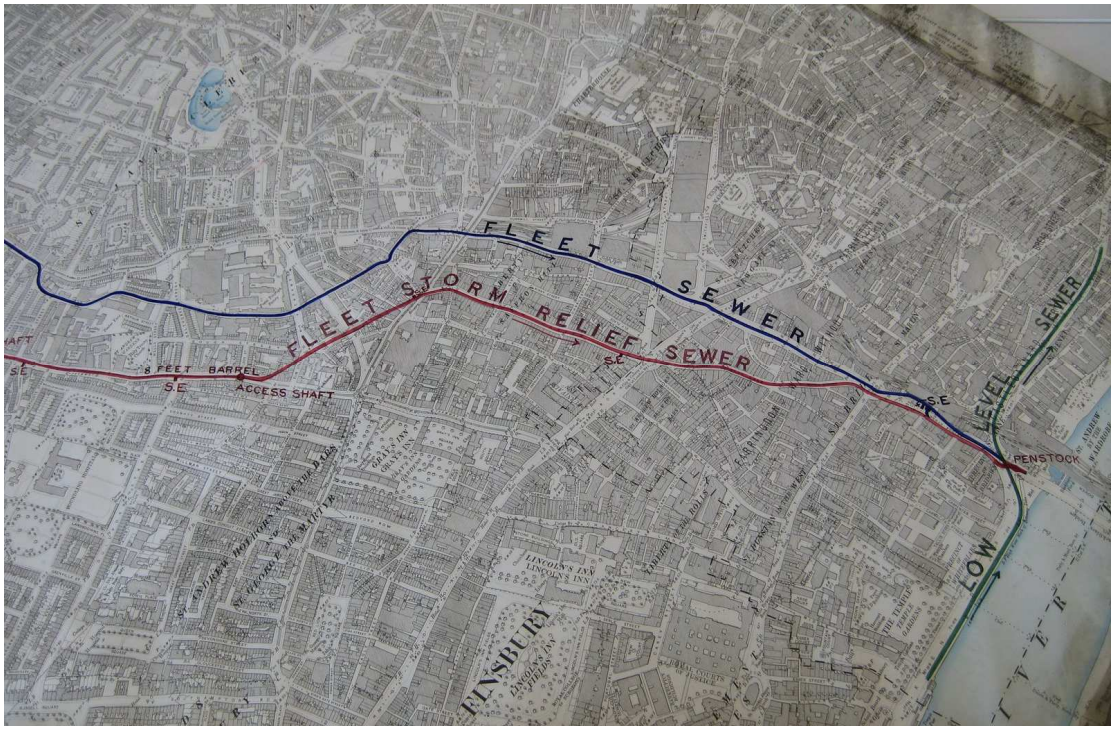

Figure 2: Map Showing Position and Dimensions of Fleet Sewer and Storm Relief Sewer at Holborn, LCC Drainage Committee, 1905

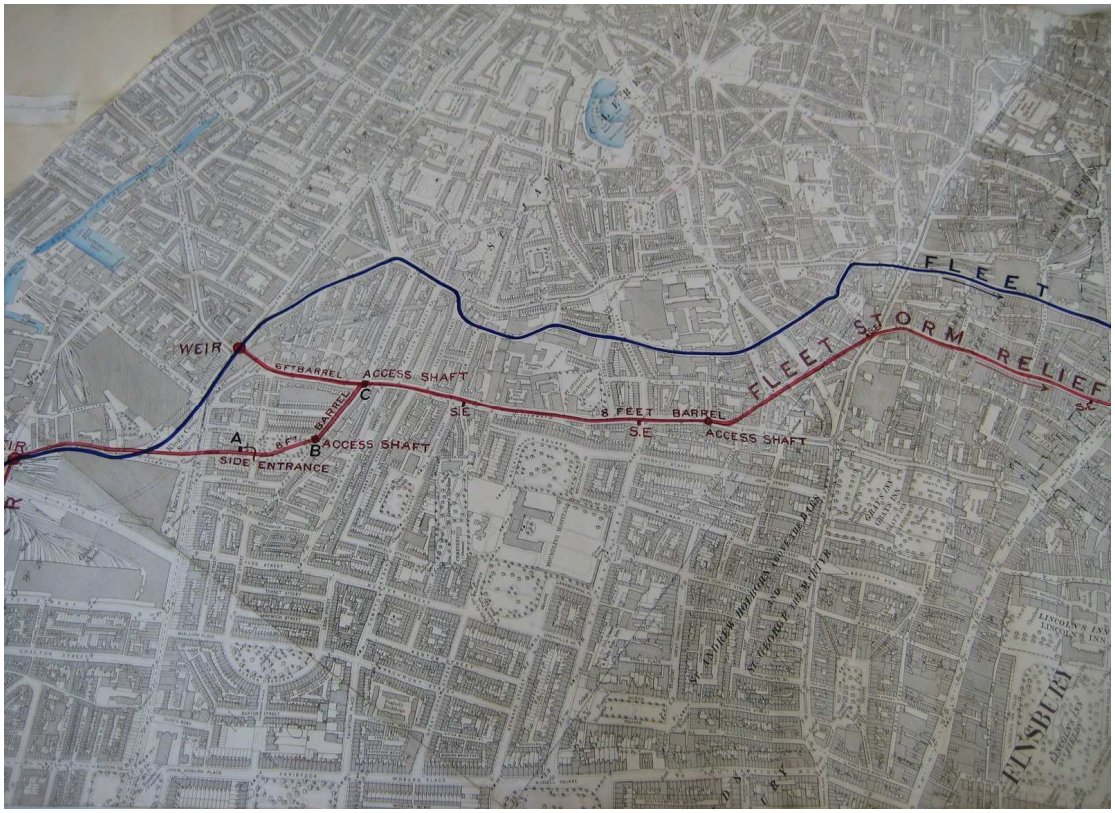

Figure 3: Map Showing Position and Dimensions of Fleet Sewer and Storm Relief Sewer at Kings Cross, LCC Drainage Committee, 1905

2 Places of Historical interest along the River

2.1 Hampstead Ponds

The abundance of wells and springs at Hampstead Heath led to it becoming an important source of potable water for the City of London between the 16th and 18th centuries. In 1539 a severe drought led the City to look further afield for their water supply. In 1543 an act was passed allowing them to take water from the springs at Hampstead, much to the concern of the villagers. However, little work was done until 1589 when the Lord Mayor Sir John Hart undertook some improvements to the wells and conduits.

Hampstead Heath Ponds are one of the two main sources of the River Fleet. The ponds on Hampstead Heath were built by the Hampstead Water Company, who dammed the Hampstead tributary to create reservoirs to supply Kentish town and the West End. It is thought that construction of the ponds began in the 17th Century. By 1703 there were two interconnecting ponds, by 1786 there were three and by 1810 there were four. The southernmost and smallest pond was purchased from the New London River Company by the London County Council in 1892 and filled in at the request of the residents of South Hill Park. In 1777 the Vale of Health reservoir was created by damming a tributary upstream of the ponds and in 1846 the Viaduct Pond was built on another tributary by Sir Thomas Wilson.[6]

The water quality in these ponds was not always very good. Arthur Hassall wrote in 1850 that the ponds were 'tolerably clean' but that the Vale of Health Reservoir was *'full of weeds, swarming with animal life, and into which no inconsiderable amount of sewage passes'*. He concluded that *'it is impossible to say that the water distributed to the public by this company is in the condition on which a scrupulous regard to health and safety depends.'*[7] In 1851 Parliament passed an act to compel the Water Companies to properly treat the water that they supplied.

The abundance of clean water in Hampstead led to it being the centre for Laundresses for several centuries. The Heath, covered with gorse bushes and broom, was used as a drying ground. Even up until the 1860s the Heath would be white with the linen spread out to dry.

2.2 Highgate Ponds

The Highgate tributary of the Fleet incorporates eight large ponds, five of which are found within the grounds of Kenwood House, and were created in the 18th Century by Hampstead Water Company. They are fed by several tributaries, of which the largest came from a meadow of Manor Farm (towards Archway Road).

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[6] Edward Walford, "Hampstead - Caen Wood and north end," in *Old and New London: Volume 5*, (British History Online, 1878), pp. 438-449.

[7] Arthur Hill Hassall, *A microscopic examination of the water supplied to the inhabitants of London and the suburban districts* ((London): Samuel Highley, 1850).

In the 1930s the water from the ponds was still being used to fill a reservoir on Camden Park Road providing water to the nearby Cattle Market.[8]

Kenwood House itself was built around 1694 by William Brydges, Surveyor General of the Ordnance. After he sold it for a sizeable profit in 1704, it changed hands many times before it was bought in 1754 by William Murray, later 1st Earl of Mansfield and Chief Justice. About ten years later, the house was remodelled by Robert Adams which resulted in the famous 18th Century façade. In 1825 the river in flood was 13' wide where it crossed Highgate Road.

2.3 Kentish Town

As well as deriving its name from the river, the development of Kentish Town has long been affected by the Fleet. In the 15th Century a chapel-of-ease was built on what is now Kentish Town Road because of persistent flooding near the existing Parish Church at St Pancras. This new site became the nucleus of the current Kentish Town and the old centre was gradually abandoned. For the next 300 years Kentish Town remained a pleasant village on the banks of the river noted for its clean air and water. It was a favourite place for wealthy outsiders to build large country houses within reach of London. It is said that Lord Nelson would often stay with his uncle, William Suckling, in a house next to the Castle Inn which backed onto the river.[9] By the end of the 18th century the rapid urbanisation of London had started and the village began to take on a less selective feel. The opening of the Regents Canal, which was built over the Fleet, in 1820 brought more industry to the area. The Fleet still occasionally made its presence felt: in 1826 the river was 65' wide at flood as it crossed Kentish Town Road opposite what is now the entrance to Sainsbury's Car Park in Camden Town

In the 1860s the arrival of the Midland Railway removed the genteel atmosphere completely and the area became a grimy working-class district surrounded by railway lines.

In the early 1800s the Fleet was still a relatively clean river in this area with no use for industry or for sewage. By 1862 however, the local residents reported that nearly 200 households were using the river as a sewer and the river and its tributaries were promptly covered up in an iron pipe.[10]

[8] M. Emily Cooke, *A Geographical Study of a London Borough- St. Pancras* (London: University of London Press, 1932).
[9] John Richardson, *Kentish Town Past* (London: Historical Publications, 1997).
[10] Edward Walford, "Camden Town and Kentish Town," in *Old and New London: Volume 5*, (London: British History Online, 1878), pp. 309-324.

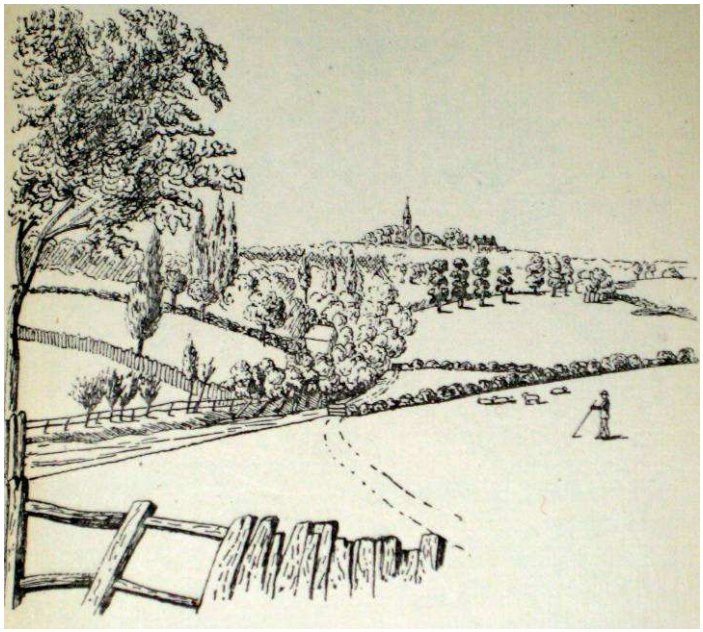

Figure 4: A view of the valley of the Fleet and Highgate Church from Fortess Terrae, Kentish town, Sept. 28, 1845 (Water Colour by A. Crosby)

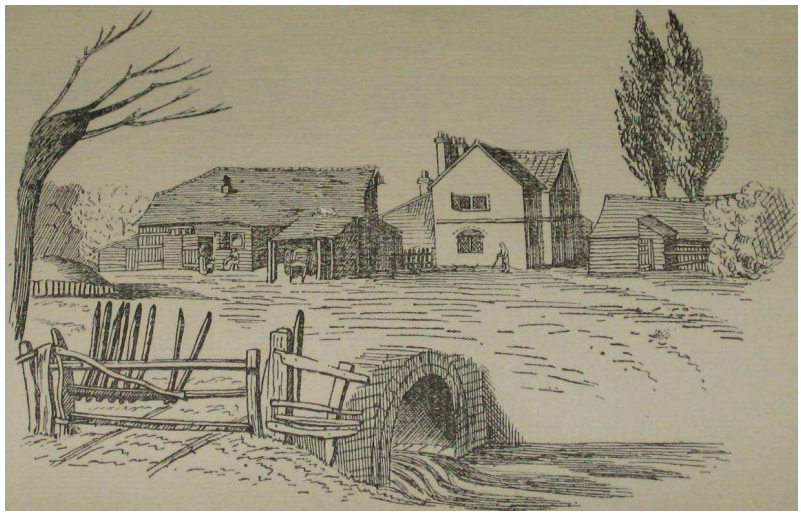

Figure 5: The Fleet at Kentish Town - Browne's Dairy Farm, Sept. 21, 1833. (Water Colour by A. Crosby) - Now the site of Camden Road Station

2.4 St Pancras Old Church

Originally the Parish of St Pancras stretched all the way from Oxford Street to Highgate. The old Parish Church of St Pancras, thought to be one of the oldest churches in the country (although the current building is from the 19th century), stands on a knoll to the east of the Fleet. To the south the area flattens out into St Pancras Wash, a former flood plain of the river. As mentioned earlier, by the 13th Century the frequent floods here were encouraging parishioners to move towards the somewhat drier Kentish Town, with the added benefit of the better water supplies and soil quality in that vicinity. The problems of flooding in the area may have led to the comparatively early enclosure of the river between St Pancras workhouse

(north of the church) and Battle Bridge in around 1766. If it was, it was to little success as in 1809 and 1818 a severe flood covered most of the area. St Pancras Way was originally a track winding beside the River Fleet. To its west, College Grove crosses the former river valley. This can clearly be seen by taking the path through to the archway on Royal College Street. A map of 1825 marks two small bridges at this spot.

Despite the gradual reduction in flow throughout its history, the river here was still substantial before its enclosure. In 1760 the Fleet here is described as an ever-flowing rivulet of 5-6 ft width and about 1 ft deep unless when swollen by long continued rain.

Despite the building of a new chapel of ease in Kentish town, the old church remained as the Parish Church until 1822, when a new church was built at Woburn Place. By 1847 the church was in a ruinous state and was almost completely rebuilt to accommodate the growing numbers of people within the parishioners.

In 1866 the Midland Railway Company began tunnelling through the churchyard in order to reach its terminus. However, the public outcry at the disinternment of bodies was such that the work was soon abandoned.

Figure 6: St Pancras Old Church c. 1815

Figure 7: St Pancras Old Church, March 2009

2.5 St Pancras Wells

These were situated on the south side of Church Hill, the slight mound on which the Old Church sits. They are first mentioned in 1697 by the proprietor of a local tavern in a handbill advertising the virtues of the waters. By 1700 the complex consisted of a Long Room, two pump rooms and a house of entertainment as well as extensive gardens with shaded walks. An advertisement of 1769 describes the St Pancras waters as being 'in the greatest perfection and highly recommended by the most eminent physicians in the Kingdom'. At the end of the 18th Century the well appears to have been enclosed in the garden of a private house near the churchyard, 'neglected and passed out of mind'. These houses were demolished during the building of St Pancras station.

2.6 King's Cross

The name King's Cross refers to an unpopular monument to George IV that was erected here in 1836. The area was originally called Battle Bridge, a corruption of Bradeford Bridge (possibly meaning Broad Ford Bridge), referring to a ford across the Fleet here. The bridge itself was latterly a single brick arch which was incorporated into the sewer when the river was enclosed.

The river flowed on the western side of Pancras Road and was joined by two tributaries in the area of King's Cross: the first joins the river at St Pancras station from the west beginning under University College Hospital; the second came from the east and joined the main river near the Caledonian Road. Although the river in much of the area was covered fairly early, the Euston Road tributary was still uncovered at the turn of the 19th century.

The confluence of these streams and the general flatness of the area led to severe floods occurring such that it became known as 'Pancras Wash'. In the 15th Century residents of the area complained to the King about the flooding; in 1679 the surge of the waters was so great that houses were destroyed as far as Cowcross and 'cattle floated on the stream to Clerkenwell'[11]; in 1809 and 1818 the area was covered with 3 ft water even though the river in this section had already been enclosed. Although the river was somewhat tamed through the construction of the Storm Relief Sewer, on the 5th August 1931 King's Cross Station was flooded and brought both mainline and suburban services to a halt. In parts of the main line tunnel the water was 4 to 5 ft deep and passengers on the Metropolitan Line had to 'walk through 2 to 3 in after alighting from the trains'.

Although the advent of the Regents Canal to the north led to an increase in the industry around Kings Cross it was the opening of Kings Cross

[11] Walter Thornbury, "The Fleet River and Fleet Ditch ," in *Old and New London: Volume 2*, (British History Online, 1878), pp. 416-426.

Railway station in 1852 and St Pancras station in 1868 which resulted in an explosion of development. This in turn led to the complete covering of the river here and south towards Bagnigge Wells.

2.7 St Chad's Well

This was a medicinal well which was dedicated to St Chad, the first Bishop of Litchfield and patron saint of springs and wells. The mineral composition of the well was supposedly similar to the famous wells of the same name at Litchfield. Like other wells, it became popular in the middle of the 18th century and at its peak in 1772 had over 1,000 vistors a week and charged a £1 annual subscription. As the fashion for spas waned at the beginning of the 19th century the area became a pleasure garden for local people. There were several short-lived attempts to revive the spa, but the last remnants of the gardens disappeared with the construction of the Metropolitan line in 1860.

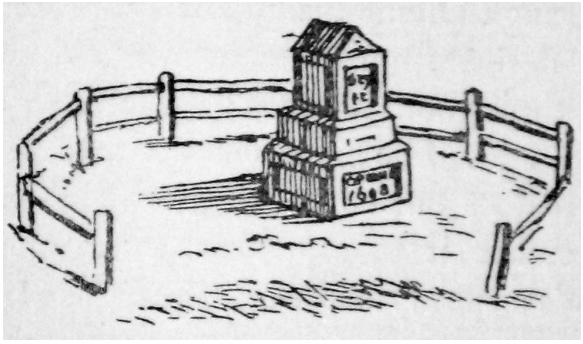

Figure 8: St Chad's Well

2.8 Bagnigge Wells

Bagnigge Wells was one of the most popular 18th-century spas and was reputed to be the summer retreat of Charles II's mistress Nell Gwynne. In 1757, the then owner Thomas Hughes asked the scientist John Bevis to investigate why no flowers grew in his garden. The water from the well behind the house was found to contain high levels of iron. The water from another well subsequently built 40 yards to the north was found to have purgative properties. In 1758, Hughes opened the gardens daily and charged 3d for tasting the waters. A season ticket cost half a guinea. The banqueting hall of the house was converted into a long room with an organ at one end and a distorting mirror at the other. The water itself was dispensed by a double pump in a small building known as the temple. Entertainments were also added into the gardens in the form of tea arbours, a bun house, a skittle alley, a bowling green, a fish pond, and flower gardens and formal walks edged with holly and box. Seats were provided along the banks of the Fleet (a sizeable river at this point) which flowed through the garden 'for such as chuse to smoke or drink cyder , ale etc. which are not permitted in other parts of the garden.'

The spa continued to be a popular and fashionable haunt until the end of the 18th century. However, by 1810 it was noted that they were 'much resorted to by the lower class of tradesman'. In 1813 the manager went

bankrupt and although over the next twenty years there were several attempts to restore it, the spa finally closed in 1841 and was built on soon after. The stone plaque in the wall at 61-63 Kings Cross Road is likely to mark the north-west boundary of the site.[12]

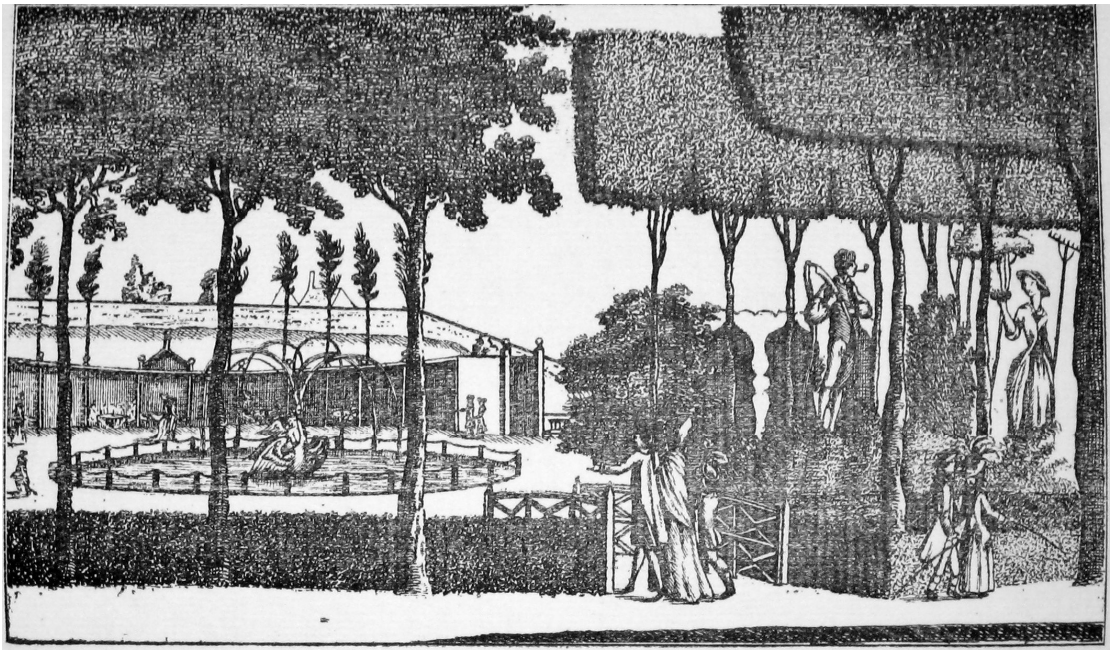

Figure 9: A view from the centre bridge at Bagnigge Wells Gardens, C18th

Figure 10: The Plaque marking the boundary of Bagnigge Wells, March 2009

[12] *The London Encyclopaedia* eds. Ben Weinreb and Christopher Hibbert, First edn London: Macmillan, 1983).

2.9 Lamb's Conduit

The conduit drew upon several springs in the area around what is now Queen's Square which previously formed a tributary into the Fleet at Mount Pleasant. The path of this tributary can be clearly seen by looking at historical parish boundaries in the area.

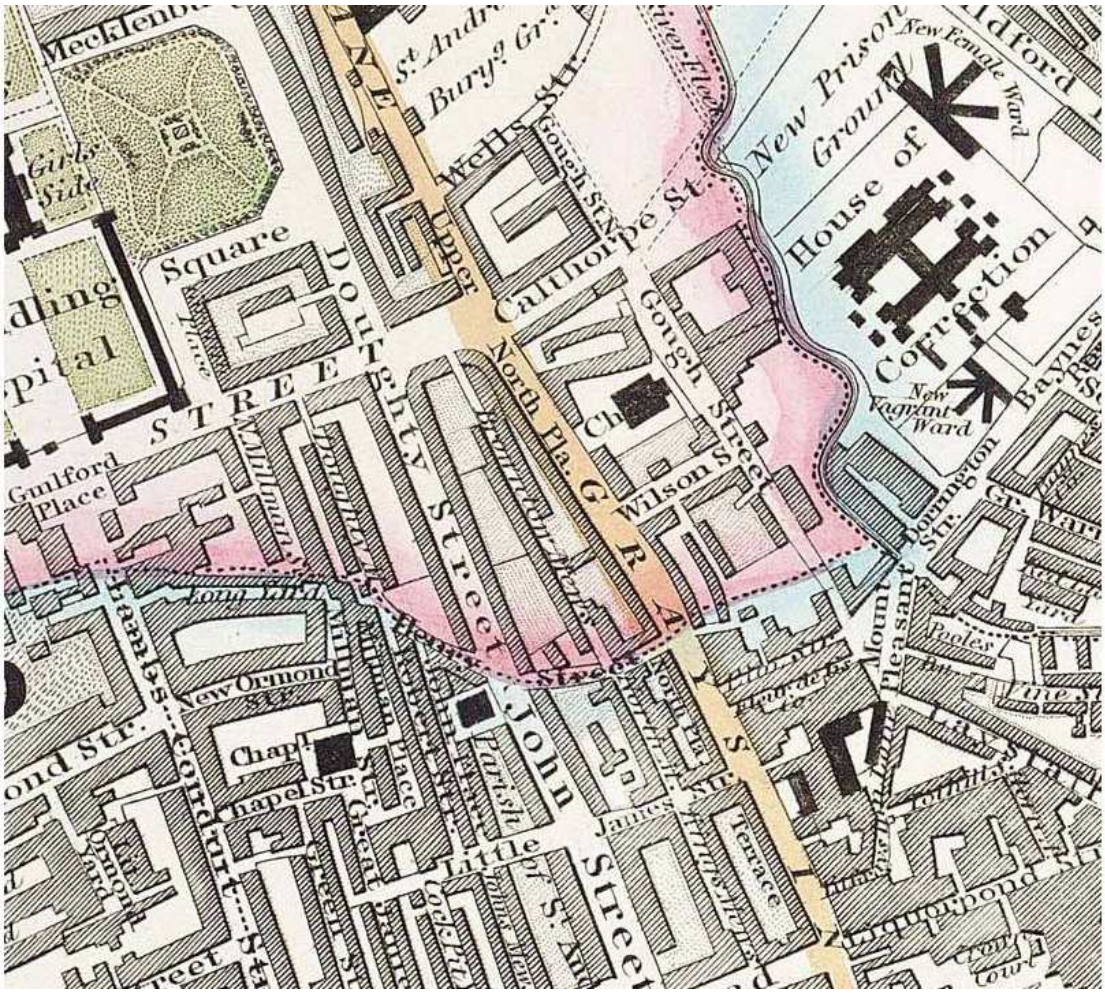

Figure 11: Part of Greenwood's Map of London (1830) Showing Parish Boundaries. The pink highlight shows the boundary being defined by the Fleet River in the East and a historic tributary running approximately East-West into the Fleet.

In 1258 a leaden pipe was laid from this reservoir to Leather Lane and on to Newgate Street in order to supply the Grey Friars Convent there. In 1498 the Conduit was improved by the widow of the former mayor John Percival among others. In 1577 William Lamb, a Gentleman of the King's Chapel and a City Clothworker, restored the conduit, lining it with lead and augmenting the flow with other springs. Its head stood on Snow Hill at the junction between Cock Lane and Smithfield Street. The length of the conduit was at least 2000 yards and the project cost him about £1500, a great sum for the time. In addition, he purchased 120 pails for carrying water to the poor women of the parish. After the Great Fire, the head was rebuilt from a design by Sir Christopher Wren. However, in 1746 the conduit was removed, mainly due to the advent of the New River. In its place was erected an obelisk with lamps. However, this was soon found to be a nuisance and removed.

At its source in Queen's Square, the conduit remained until 1911 in the garden of No. 20. Pictures of its destruction are available within the LCC archive.

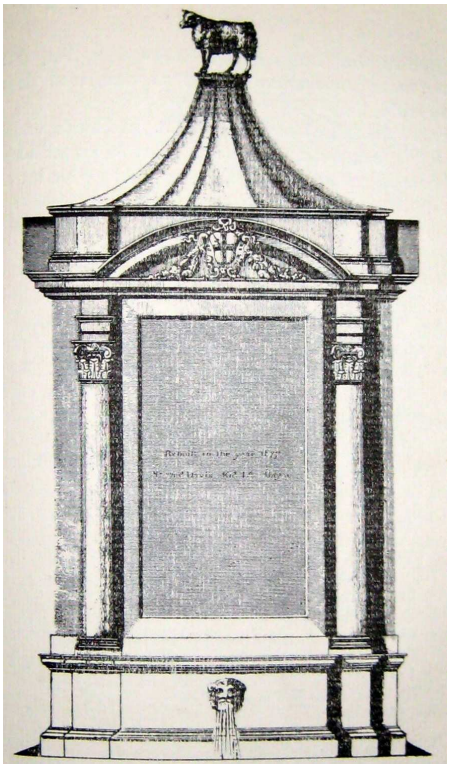

Figure 12: Lamb's Conduit as rebuilt by Wren, Snow Hill

Figure 13: The surround of a pump from Lamb's Conduit, Long Yard, March 2009

Figure 14: Sign on French's Dairy, Rugby St, March 2009

2.10 Coldbath Fields

Coldbath fields lay to the east of the river in the place now known as Mount Pleasant. It was named after a spring discovered here in 1697 and it was claimed that the water 'prevents and cures cold, creates appetite, helps digestion, and makes hardy the tenderest constitution.' The bath remained until around 1865.[13]

The prison here was built in 1794 and held over 1,000 people. It soon became notorious for its severity. Coleridge and Southey described it in "The Devil's Thoughts,":
"As he went through Coldbath Fields he saw
A solitary cell;
And the Devil was pleased, for it gave him a hint
For improving his prisons in hell."

Standing where the Mount Pleasant Sorting Office is now, the river ran right beside its wall. The prison was closed in 1877 and sold to the Post Office and the site was redeveloped as a parcel sorting office. In 1913, the Post Office Railway between Paddington and Whitechapel was opened to allow rapid movement of mail between nine stations across London, including Mount Pleasant, Rathbone Place and Liverpool Street. The trains were small, running on a 2 ft gauge, but at its peak the railway could carry over 4 million letters in

[13] Walter Thornbury, "Coldbath Fields and Spa Fields," in *Old and New London: Volume 2*, (London: British History Online, 1878), pp. 298-306

a day. The railway was 'mothballed' in 2003.[14]

2.11 Hockley In-the Hole

Hockley-in-the-Hole was one of the most infamous areas in London and was the haunt of thieves, highwaymen and bull and bear baiters. It lay on the north bank of the river as it turned away from Farringdon Road to the West where Ray Street now stands. The name itself is derived from its proximity to the Fleet: Hockley is derived from the Saxon for 'muddy field'.

At the beginning of the 18th century the area was full of narrow streets with ruinous buildings. Next to where the Coach and Horses Pub now stands was the Bear Garden where self-styled Masters-at-Arms would fight with swords and cudgels or wrestle against each other for money. On Mondays and Thursdays, the days of the bull and bear baitings, the animals were paraded solemnly through the streets while advertising bills were distributed to the crowds:

"At the Bear Garden, Hockley-in-the-Hole, 1710.—This is to give notice to all gentlemen gamesters, and others, that on this present Monday is a match to be fought by two dogs, one from Newgate Market against one from Hony Lane Market, at a bull, for a guinea, to be spent. Five let-goes out of hand; which goes fairest and farthest in wins all. Likewise a green bull to be baited, which was never baited before, and a bull to be turned loose, with fireworks all over him; also a mad ass to be baited. With a variety of bull-baiting and bear-baiting, and a dog to be drawn up with fireworks. To begin exactly at three of the clock."[15]

Similar processions happened on fighting days:

"A trial of skill to be performed between two profound masters of the noble science of self-defence, on Wednesday next, the 13th of July, 1709, at two o'clock precisely. I, George Gray, born in the city of Norwich, who has fought in most parts of the West Indies—viz., Jamaica, Barbadoes, and several other parts of the world, in all twenty-five times upon the stage, and was never yet worsted, and am now lately come to London, do invite James Harris to meet and exercise at the following weapons: back-sword, sword and dagger, sword and buckler, single falchion, and case of falchions. I, James Harris, master of the said noble science of defence, who formerly rid in the Horse Guards, and hath fought 110 prizes, and never left a stage to any man, will not fail (God willing) to meet this brave and bold inviter at the time and place appointed, desiring sharp swords, and from him no favour. No person to be upon the stage but the seconds.
"Vivat Regina."

Cockfighting was also a popular entertainment here, with people bringing their animals from across London to fight. However, managing the menagerie of fighting animals could sometimes be very dangerous:

[14] "Unofficial MailRail Web Page.", http://www.mailrail.co.uk/
[15] Walter Thornbury, "Hockley-in-the-Hole," in *Old and New London: Volume 2*, (British History Online, 1878), pp. 306-309.

"In 1709 a most tragical occurrence took place at Hockley-in-the-Hole. Christopher Preston, the proprietor of the Bear Garden, was attacked by one of his own bears, and almost devoured, before his friends were aware of his danger. A sermon upon this sad event was preached in the church of St. James's by the Rev. Dr. Pead, the then incumbent of Clerkenwell."

The old dwelling house on the site became the Coach and Horses pub from which there was rumoured to be a vaulted passage to the banks of the Fleet. In the late 18th century the area was cleaned up and the roads widened. In 1774 the name was officially changed to Ray Street in an attempt to re-brand the area.

Much of this area was later 'made up' in order to level out the steep valley sides. There is around 5-15 ft of 'made earth' at Bagnigge Wells and the north end of Farringdon Street, 13 ft at Gwynne Place and 18' by Mount Pleasant.[16]

2.12 Clerkenwell

Clerkenwell lies very close to Hockley-in-the-Hole on the east bank of the river. It is named after the Clerk's Well, which can be found in a building on Farringdon Lane. This well was named after the Parish Clerks who would perform their mystery plays nearby and served the nearby St Mary's Nunnery and the Priory of St. John of Jerusalem. The land here was once a fertile meadow with many other springs and wells such as Skinners' Well and Faggeswell. To the north, on the riverbank where the river curved around to the west stood the Priory vineyards with a small cottage at the top of the hill. The vineyard was still in existence until 1752.

After the dissolution of the monasteries, the church of the nunnery was rededicated to St James and became the parish church. The monastery buildings were incorporated into the manors of the new owners, members of the Tudor nobility. The church was rebuilt in 1788-91, the old church having fallen into disrepair.[17]

In the early 19th century, the area underwent rapid expansion and the area became a slum. The construction of Farringdon Road and Clerkenwell Road led to hundreds of families being made homeless. However, it also swept away much of the less salubrious aspects of the area. Turnmill Street and Chick Lane (also known as West St) were for centuries notorious havens for criminals. The Red Lion Tavern on West St was particularly popular with those trying to escape from the Law. A rabbit warren of dark closets, trapdoors, and sliding panels, it allowed many fugitives to successfully escape the law. The nearby river also provided a useful method of disposal of incriminating evidence: Thornbury tells how a sailor was robbed here, and afterwards flung naked through a hole in the wall into the Fleet.

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[16] M. Emily Cooke, *A Geographical Study of a London Borough- St. Pancras* (London: University of London Press, 1932).

[17] Walter Thornbury, "Clerkenwell - (part 2 of 2)," in *Old and New London: Volume 2*, (London: British History Online, 1878), pp. 328-338.

In the 20th Century the population of the area steadily declined and many old streets have been demolished.[18]

In 1615 a prison was built here to relieve Bridewell Prison (See section 2.16). This was joined in 1775 by the 'New Prison' or House of Detention at Clerkenwell on Corporation Row to relieve Newgate prison. In 1804 after the construction of Coldbath Prison, the 'Bridewell' was demolished. The House of detention was rebuilt in 1818 and again in 1845. As a remand prison, it was one of London's busiest although it only held around 200 inmates. The prison was the scene of an unsuccessful rescue attempt of two Fenian prisoners, Burke and Casey, in 1867. The explosion not only demolished a large part of the wall but it killed 12 people and injured nearly 50, many of whom were nearby residents. The prison was closed in 1877 and demolished in 1890.

2.13 Holborn Bridge and Viaduct

Holborn Bridge stood between Holborn Hill and Snow Hill, slightly north of where Holborn Viaduct now stands. It marked the head of the tidal estuary i.e. the Fleet proper. A bridge over the river existed from as early as the 13th Century. Stow mentions it as an important route for people travelling between Newgate and the North or West of the city.

After the Great Fire, Holborn Bridge was widened in order to allow for more traffic and the name of the Lord Mayor was carved into the coping on the east side. In 1840, long after the river had been covered up here, Mr. Tite, F.S.A. was able to view the south side of the bridge during some works on the sewer. The arch of the bridge was about 20' across and it met with the road from the east at an angle. According to the description of Antony Crosby, a Victorian Artist, there were actually four bridges at Holborn bridge: the original, two supplementary bridges to increase the size, and Wren's bridge which was also designed as a 'beautiful terminus' for his Canal.

In 1737 the section of Wren's canal between Holborn and Fleet Bridges was arched over and became the site of the Fleet Market- the market that had been displaced by the construction of the Mansion House.

Holborn Viaduct was built in 1864-9 to remove the obstacle of Holborn Hill and Snow Hill. The whole length of the viaduct is actually 1,400 ft, with the bridge over Farringdon road only being a small part of the whole structure. It is 80 ft wide and the whole redevelopment scheme (including the construction of Holborn Circus) was said to have cost £2.5 million. While this was never a direct bridge over the exposed river Fleet, it is important to note that the reason for its construction was because of the steep valley of the Fleet in this area.

There existed a wooden bridge over the Fleet at Cow Lane which was called Cowbridge. By 1603 this bridge had decayed and a new wooden bridge was built at Chick Lane (the eastern side of Charterhouse Street).

[18] *The London Encyclopaedia* eds. Ben Weinreb and Christopher Hibbert, First edn (London: Macmillan, 1983).

2.14 Fleet Prison

The Fleet Prison stood on the East bank of the River between Ludgate Hill and the Old Fleet Lane. It is thought to have been built soon after the Norman Conquest[19] although the first record of it is in 1170-1. Initially, the post of Keeper was hereditary with the Leveland family holding it between c.1197 and 1558. After this the appointment was held by a variety of gentlemen who would purchase it from a previous holder.

The Prison was long attached to the Court of Chancery, and therefore had many more debtors and other less criminal offenders than many other prisons. Between the reign of Henry VIII and 1641 prisoners from the Court of the Star Chamber were sent here.

The Keeper was entitled to the customs duty on the Fleet River and to the fees paid by the prisoners for food, board and any other privileges. However, this system was greatly abused with wardens fining and extorting money from the prisoners, even allowing some to stay away from the prison on payment of a fee. The prison was divided into several parts with the main building, precinct (around which flowed a moat using water from the Fleet) and 'the rules', a set of houses which stood outside the moat.

Like all the other buildings in the area, the prison was destroyed by the Great Fire and subsequently rebuilt. In 1729, the Keeper, Thomas Bambridge, was found guilty by a parliamentary inquiry of 'great extortions, and the highest crimes and misdemeanours' They found that he had 'arbitrarily and unlawfully loaded with irons, put into dungeons and destroyed prisoners for debt, under his charge, treating them in a most barbarous and cruel manner.' He was dismissed under a special Act of Parliament and a set of 20 rules was drawn up for future Keepers.

By 1774, the prison was found to be 'crowded with women and children, being riotous and dirty'. In 1780 the Gordon Rioters set fire to the prison and released all the inmates. The prison was immediately rebuilt but this did not improve the conditions within it. In 1792 and 1815 Parliamentary Committees inspected the prison and made recommendations concerning its improvement but these were ignored. A detailed description of the prison at the beginning of the 19th Century is given by Charles Dickens in his *Pickwick Papers*. The prison was closed in 1842 and demolished in 1846.

The chapel in the prison was also the original site of the tradition of Fleet Marriages. These were clandestine marriages that took advantage of the fact that the prison was not under the jurisdiction of a parish and also acted as a source of additional income to the Keeper. The first documented marriage took place in 1615 although it is likely that several had happened before this date. In 1711 a statute was passed fining the Keeper for taking any profit from the marriages. The effect was to move the marriages to local taverns and marriage

[19] Edward Hasted, "Parishes - Leveland," in *The History and Topographical Survey of the County of Kent: Volume 6*, (British History Online, 1798), pp. 461-467.

houses, the services being conducted by disgraced clergy in the prison or living in the neighbouring area. During the 1740s as many as 6000 marriages were being conducted annually. It was only after the passing of the Marriage Act 1753 that required banns to be read or a special license to be obtained that the marriages were stopped.

A bridge known as the Middle Bridge crossed the river here at (Old) Fleet Lane from at least the 16th Century. In the Fleet Canal Restoration after the Great Fire, the bridge was replaced by a high-arched pedestrian bridge with stone steps, similar to that at Bridewell.

2.15 Fleet Bridge

Fleet Bridge was one of the most important bridges over the River Fleet as it lay on the main road between the City and Westminster i.e. between Ludgate Hill and Fleet Street. It is first mentioned in 1197.[20] In 1307, the Warden of the Fleet Prison was charged with repairing the timbers of the bridge and the Sheriffs of London to pave the bridge. In 1431 the Lord Mayor John Welles was responsible for either the building or restoration of the bridge described as 'stone faire coped, on either side with iron pikes, on the which towards the south be also certain Lanthornes of stone, for lights to be placed in the winter evenings'.[21] To mark the occasion, the coping of the bridge was marked with a likeness of him embraced by angels at this date. At the restoration there were at least two taverns on the bridge.

The bridge was destroyed by the Great Fire and a new one was constructed as part of the New Canal development. Strype (1720) describes this new bridge as being wide enough for the 'conveniency of Coaches and Carts' as well as having safe walkways for pedestrians, a necessity of it being 'so great a thoroughfare'. The sides of the bridge were 'breast-high' and decorated with pineapples and the City Coat of Arms. In 1751 the Rainbow Coffeehouse stood on the bridge. The end of the bridge came when Farringdon Street was built in 1765.

In 1999 historian Simon Thurley working in conjunction with Thames Water succeeded in finding stones from the western end of the bridge embedded in the brickwork of the sewer under Ludgate Circus.

2.16 Bridewell

Henry VIII built a palace here between 1515 and 1520 on the banks of the Fleet. It consisted of three courtyards surrounded by rambling brick buildings. It was here that preliminary conferences with the papal legate on the King's divorce took place in 1528 and it is probable that Catherine of Aragon last saw her husband when they dined here on the 30th November 1529. Between 1531-9 it was leased to the French Ambassador and in 1533 was the location for Holbein's painting, *The Ambassadors*.[22] In 1553, at the insistence of the then

[20] Henry A Harben, *A Dictionary of London* (British History Online, 1918)
[21] John Stow, *A Survey of London: Reprinted from the text of 1603* ed. C.L. Kingsford (British History Online, 1908).
[22] Edward Geoffrey O'Donoghue, *Bridewell hospital : palace, prison, schools* 2 vols (London: Lane, 1923).

Bishop of London, Edward VI gave the building over to the City as a home for vagrants and homeless children and 'for the punishment of petty offenders and disorderly women'. Following the confirmation of the charter by Queen Mary in 1556, the palace was turned into a combined prison, hospital and workrooms. As a prison, it was for more minor offences, and public floggings took place in the courtyard twice a week. The Bridewell Royal Hospital initially apprenticed orphans of city Freemen and later destitute children to tradesmen for seven years; however, some teaching of basic literacy was also given. Most of the buildings were destroyed in the Great Fire and the site was rebuilt in 1666-7. During the 18th century discipline among the apprentices became a serious problem with students frequently absconding or disobeying their masters. This was attributed to the corrupting influence of the prison within the institution. In the 1830s the school was relocated to Southwark to remove the pupils from the proximity of the prisoners. It latterly moved to Wormley, Surrey and changed its name to King Edward's School, Witley. The school still exists today.[23]

Conditions in the prison seem to have been relatively good compared to others at the time. It was also the first prison to have medical staff, a doctor being appointed in 1700, 75 years before any other prison. In 1788, prisoners were given straw for their beds (unlike other prisons which didn't have beds). A new prison was built in 1797.

The prison was taken in to state control in 1833 and remained on the site until 1855 when the prisoners were moved to Holloway. All of the buildings were demolished in 1863-4 except the Gateway, built in 1802, that can still be seen on New Bridge Street. Sir Polydore de Keyser, an immigrant from Belgium who worked his way from being a waiter to the first Roman Catholic Lord Mayor of London since the Reformation, built a very successful 400 room hotel on the site. In 1931 it was replaced by the Unilever building which still exists today.

The institution was so well known that many other similar facilities took its name including those in Westminster, Clerkenwell, Leeds, Nottingham, Bristol and Dublin.

Before the covering of the Fleet in the 1760s, there existed a bridge across the river at Bridewell; the first bridge was built by Henry VIII to allow Charles V, the Holy Roman Emperor, to reach his lodgings at Blackfriars Monastery. After the Great Fire, Bridewell Bridge was restored by Wren as a high-arched pedestrian bridge similar to the bridge at Fleet Lane.

[23] "King Edward's School, Witley - Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia."

Figure 15: Bridewell Prison and the entrance to the River Fleet c. 1660

2.17 Blackfriars

The Dominican Monastery from which the area takes its name was originally founded in Chancery Lane in 1221. In 1278 the monks were granted Baynard's Castle and Montfichet Tower on the east bank of the Fleet. The monastery became very rich and had great influence, particularly because of its patronage by the King. It acted as the meeting place of the Court of Chancery and even Parliament in the 14th Century. In 1529 the divorce court of Catherine of Aragon sat here. However, the monastery was dissolved in 1538 and most of the buildings were demolished. In 1576 Richard Farrant, Master of the Children of Windsor Chapel, leased part of the monks' buttery so that the choirboys could practice 'for the better training them to do her Majestie service'. In reality, the theatre was a commercial enterprise which was frequented by the well-to-do. The theatre was closed in 1585 when the lease was voided but in 1596 a new theatre opened in the monks' refectory under James Burbage, the father of the famous actor Richard Burbage and close associate of William Shakespeare. The new theatre was 100' long by 50' wide, nearly twice the size of the original. However, local residents persuaded the Lord Chamberlin to prevent the 'Lord Chamberlin's Men', Burbage's theatre troop, from performing in it.

Instead, the theatre was leased to Henry Evans, a lawyer who had been involved with the first theatre, and he entered into a partnership with Richard Farrant's successor at Windsor, Nathaniel Giles. The 'Children of the Chapel', as the company was known, consisted of both choristers of the Chapel Royal and of other boys, usually from local grammar schools, drafted by Giles using his warrant to provide entertainment for the Queen. The children's companies were very popular at this time and rivalled the adult companies.

In Hamlet, Shakespeare refers to them bitterly as:

"an aery of children, little eyases,
that cry out on the top of question, and are most
tyrannically clapped for't: these are now the
fashion, and so berattle the common stages--so they
call them--that many wearing rapiers are afraid of
goose-quills and dare scarce come thither."

He also wonders:

> *"Will they pursue the quality no longer than they can sing? will they not say afterwards, if they should grow themselves to common players--as it is most like, if their means are no better--their writers do them wrong, to make them exclaim against their own succession?"*[24]

During this time the theatre became a centre for young Jacobean playwrights, producing plays by Ben Johnson, Thomas Middleton, George Chapman and John Marston. It also premiered works by John Fletcher and Francis Beaumont who went on to become two of the most important dramatists in Renaissance theatre. The theatre also led in technical innovation, being one of the first to rely solely on artificial light and feature music between acts. However, their *avant-garde* approach was to be their downfall, in 1605 they received official censure for a production of the satirical comedy *Eastward Ho*. In the following years they put on several other highly controversial performances, however, the production of 1608 of *The Conspiracy and Tragedy of Charles, Duke of Byron* managed to cause great offence to the French Ambassador. Although the troop continued to perform, after this debacle the theatre at Blackfriars was taken back by Burbage and his troop, by this time 'The Kings Men', and run by him along with six other partners, one of which was William Shakespeare.

From 1609 the troop used the theatre for seven months over the winter before relocating to the Globe theatre for the summer. The Blackfriars theatre was vastly more profitable as the company earned nearly twice as much as they did at the Globe.

The theatre continued to be a great success, even receiving royal patronage but was closed at the onset of the Civil war and demolished in 1655.

The first bridge at Blackfriars (originally called the William Pitt Bridge) was built in 1760-9 when the lower part of the Fleet was finally covered over. It was the third bridge in London after London Bridge and Westminster Bridge to span the Thames. It was replaced a century later by the current design (by Joseph Cubitt and H. Carr) and was opened on the same day as Holborn Viaduct.

It is interesting to note the depth of 'made earth' in this area. At the west end of Queen Victoria Street (north side) it is 25 ft and at the east end of Victoria Embankment (north side) it is only 12½ ft.

[24] William Shakespeare, "Act 2, Scene 2," in *Hamlet*.

Appendix- Historical Maps of the Fleet

The following are examples of historical maps provided by British History Online. They can be viewed on their website (http://www.british-history.ac.uk/Default.aspx) in greater detail:

1. **'Woodcut' map of London c. 1550 (1550)**

   Produced in c. 1633, depicting the City of London in the 1560s. It probably derives from the 'Copperplate' map of. c.1560 of which three sheets are extant.

2. **Hollar's 'Exact Surveigh' of the City of London, 1667**

   A map of the City of London prepared by John Leake, William Leybourne and four others, to show the extent of the area devastated by the Great Fire of 1666.

3. **Morgan's map of the whole of London in 1682**

   Survey of the City of London and the surrounding built-up area (including Westminster and part of Southwark), on a scale of 300 feet to the inch, completed in 1682 by William Morgan.

4. **James de la Feuille's map of London c. 1690**

   One of a number of small maps of London produced in Amsterdam before 1720, derived from Hollar's 'New Mapp' of 1675.

5. **Ogilby and Morgan's large scale map of the city as rebuilt by 1676**

   Survey of the City of London by John Ogilby and William Morgan, on a scale of 100 feet to the inch, completed in 1676

NB. Other excellent online resources are Greenwood's Maps of London at 1827 and 1830.

These can be found online at: http://users.bathspa.ac.uk/greenwood/ and http://www.motco.com/map/81003/ .