

THE UNDERGROUND WAY TO LITERATURE

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If you have no sense of humor, read no further. If you are willfully uninterested in English literature, English history, and the life of London, stop right here, for this is a paper intended to entertain you lightly with anecdotes relating to those matters, which are dear to me and to the reader I would welcome. It may be that eke belike betimes, if you proceed, you will acquire information, but I am going to be quoting Gilbert-and-Sullivan and almost never (well, hardly ever) inflicting on you etymology or the cataloguing of residences and burial-places. My punning title refers to the Underground Railway, operated nowadays by London Transport.

In a patter-song in the Gilbert-and-Sullivan light opera Iolanthe (1882), the Lord Chancellor inventively describes an almost endless nightmare one might have to endure. He mentions two stations of the Underground:

And you're giving a treat
(Penny ice and cold meat)
To a party of friends and relations--

They're a ravenous horde--
And they all came on board
At Sloane Square and South Kensington stations.

Only humor, or bitter realism, could attract an author to the stations of the Underground. They are among man's least attractive achievements: ugly, dirty noisy, drafty, smelly, and just about as alike as identical twins--those rising above-ground in the system being little better. There are nearly 300 in current use. Since the 1860s the Underground has stretched its tentacles ever farther into the countryside in all directions.

Being familiar with this railway, I wondered recently whether or not anyone other than Gilbert had conferred literary immortality on Underground station names. My few leads took me nowhere, suspense fiction aside, until our onomatological polymath Professor Leonard R. N. Ashley put me onto the productions of the late poet laureate, Sir John Betjeman. I did indeed discover passing mention of a few, and even better yet, an entire poem, titled "Baker Street Station Buffet." But evidently my idea wasn't going to work. Could something else be done with station names?

Scanning the long list, I saw that the names have come from various landmarks, past or present:

natural features, taverns, sports fields, city gates, monuments, churches, gardens, parks, squares, streets, and districts.

Although not one of these station names is dedicated directly to literary history--more's the pity!--they carry literary associations galore. It is a selection of these that I shall deal with.

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Are you ready, now, to be "taken for a ride"? Fumble in your pocket or purse for several of the heavy "10-p." pieces you will need for the ticket machines, enter the proper gate, ride down the escalator, wait for your train, and enter a "carriage," saying "Sorry!" as you bump into your fellow-passengers, sit on the nearest comfortably-cushioned seat (unless you prefer to move to a smoking section), and relax, with a street-map of London and these pages torn from L.O.S. for ready reference.

Arriving at the destination chosen when you bought your ticket, get off, and surrender your ticket at the "barrier." In the open air, you have emerged at one of the stations listed alphabetically below, and are ready to prowl about, to familiarize yourself with a bit of literature-"cum"-history (as the Brits say).

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BAKER STREET.

As every devotee of detective fiction knows, the imaginary address #221-B Baker Street was the residence of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes (1891...). Look for it in hushed reverence.

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BARBICAN.

In the district called the Barbican--the name comes from a vanished fortified tower of the Middle Ages--stands the church of St. Giles Cripplegate, where the poet and polemicist John Milton worshipped and in 1674 was buried. The poet and novelist Thomas Hardy's heroine Ethelberta, in the serialized piece of fiction "The Hand of Ethelberta" (1875...), was to have embraced a man in the church yard, but the very Victorian publisher obliged the author to omit this daringly too-amorous episode. In the Barbican a great center for arts, chiefly theatre and music, has been developed in recent years. At the right time of day, you will find restaurants here at suitable price levels.

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BETHNAL GREEN.

A romantic Elizabethan ballad associated with Bethnal Green tells the story of a blind beggar and his beautiful daughter. Of her four suitors, only one is not embarrassed to ask for her hand in marriage. He is presented with a dowry of 3000, for the beggar is actually a persecuted nobleman disguised for safety's sake. The opening lines are these:

My father, shee said, is soone to be scene,
 The seely blind beggar of Bednall Greene,
 That daylie sits begging for charitee,
 He is the good father of pretty Bessee.

This piece, included in Bishop Thomas Percy's Reliques of Ancient English Poetry (1765), has inspired no fewer than three dramatic works: The Blind Beggar of Bethnal Green (1600), by Chettle and Day, The Blind Beggar of Bethnal Green (1741), by Richard Dodsley, and The Beggar's Daughter of Bethnal Green (1828), by J.S. Knowles.

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BLACKFRIARS.

The name of the Blackfriar's station recalls the theatre hereabouts, dating from 1596, owned by James (and later his son Richard) Burbage. William

Shakespeare played there; he became a part-owner and some of his plays were performed there.

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BOROUGH.

"The Borough" is a traditional nickname for Southwark, the district in which stood the Tabard Inn whence Geoffrey Chaucer's pilgrims set out for Canterbury one spring day in the late 1300s.

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CHARING CROSS.

Just off Trafalgar Square, on the Strand, under the enormous British Rail station of Charing Cross, lies the Underground station of the same name. In Percy's Reliques (see BETHNAL GREEN) humorous verses refer to the destruction of the magnificent Eleanor Cross of 1294 by the Puritan Parliament in 1643:

Undone, undone the lawyers are;
 They wander about the Towne;
 Nor can find the way to Westminster
 Now Charing Cross is downe;
 At the end of the Strand they make a stand,
 Swearing they are at a loss,
 And chafing say, that's not the way
 They must go by Charing Cross.

Eleanor crosses were erected by King Edward I along the route from Lincoln to Westminster, wherever his beloved queen's body rested on her way to burial.

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COVENT GARDEN.

In the famous old market center Covent Garden, Professor Henry Higgins encounters the flower girl Liza Doolittle in Pygmalion (1913) and My Fair Lady (1956). Here also stands the theatre where opera nowadays has its principal home in London.

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HAMPSTEAD.

John Keats lived at Wentworth Place while in Hampstead when he was writing his odes (1819).

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HIGHGATE.

A tavern in the district of Highgate was celebrated by George Gordon Noel Byron, in Childe Harold's Pilgrimage (1809). ("Childe" is an archaic word meaning "youth of noble birth.") The poet as a schoolboy at Harrow was introduced there to a humorous ritual, "swearing on the horns" (drinking horns):

Many to the steep of Highgate hie:
 Ask ye, Boeotian shades, the reason why?
 'Tis to the worship of the solemn horn,
 Grasp'd in the holy hand of mystery,
 In whose dread name both men and maids are sworn
 And consecrate the oath with draught, and dance till
 morn.

And concerning Highgate the prophetess Ursula Southill ("Mother Shipton," 1488-1560) made a dire but fortu-

nately unsuccessful prediction of the downfall of
England:

Before the good folk of this kingdom be undone,
Shall Highgate Hill stand in the midst of London.

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HYDE PARK CORNER.

The stop called Hyde Park Corner is connected with literature as the setting for a minor comedy of manners, Hyde Park (1632), by James Shirley, the last of the important dramatists at the time of the closing of the theatres by the Puritans in 1642. The play was written to celebrate the opening of the great and beautiful park, previously reserved to the aristocracy, to the general public. It is amusing that Samuel Pepys, the diarist, attending a revival some forty years later, was amazed to see real horses used on the stage.

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KEW GARDENS.

At the stop for the Royal Botanical Gardens at Kew, you will recall the modern lyrical poem by Alfred Noyes, "The Barrel-Organ" (1928), in which occur the following lines

Come down to Kew in lilac-time, in lilac-
time, in lilac-time;
Come down to Kew in lilac-time (it isn't
far from London!)

And you shall wander hand-in-hand with
 love in summer's wonderland;
 Come down to Kew in lilac-time (it isn't
 far from London!)

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LEICESTER SQUARE.

At Leicester Square (pronounced "Lester") you may be remembering the catchy marching-song of World War I, still in popular song-books, one stanza of which goes like this:

So it's goodbye, Piccadilly,
 Farewell, Leicester Square!
 It's a long, long way to Tipperary,
 But my heart's right there!

One of Charles Dickens's novels, Bleak House (1852), contains this description:

A centre of attraction to indifferent foreign hotels and indifferent foreigners, old china, gaming-houses, exhibitions, and a large medley of shabbiness and drinking out of sight.

A newer encyclopedia (1937) updates the scene:

The two constituents of gay life in L. Sq. not in Dickens' catalogue are cinemas and sex shops. It is not inappropriate to mention that birth-control specialities could be obtained at a very early date in this neighbourhood. Mrs. Philips in the closing yrs. of the 17th century announced that at 'No.5 Orange Court near Leicester Fields' she sells 'implements of safety,' having had thirty-five yrs. experience of making and selling them.

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LONDON BRIDGE.

The London Bridge you will see today on the Thames is probably the fifth of the name. (The fourth was bought some few years ago and moved to Arizona, of all places!) The earliest was attacked by the Viking invader King Olaf in 1014 and collapsed after the battle, according to the Norse Keimskringla of Snorri Sturlason (13th C.). From that event comes the children's song, the wording changing over the centuries:

London bridge is falling down,
 Falling down, falling down,
 London bridge is falling down,
 My fair lady!

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MARYLEBONE.

In The Beggar's Opera (1728) John Gay situates Macheath's debauches in an entertainment center, now long vanished, named Marylebone Gardens. The etymology of the word "Marylebone" deserves space here. The original name of the area was "Tyburn," for a stream running through it. Here long stood the gallows-tree of Tyburn (where now Marble Arch is situated), to which literary references abound. Condemned highwaymen and other criminals, before execution, delivered moral discourses on the wages of sin, to enormous crowds.

Eventually the inhabitants, disliking this grim reminder, got the place-name changed from Tyburn to St. Mary-on-the Bourn ("bourn" meaning "stream"). This became corrupted to "Maryburne," and finally Mary-le-bone" (now unhyphenated), "le" meaning "by" or "near."

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MILE END.

Getting "back on the track," so to pun, let us rise to poetic heights and quote John Milton's classic satirical sonnet "On the Detraction Which Followed upon My Writing Certain Treaties" (1646?) -- Tetrachordon being one of his four "controversial" divorce tracts. The walk to Mile End, then a separate hamlet, from Aldgate would be about a mile.

A book was writ of late call'd Tetrachordon;
 And wov'n close, both matter, form and style;
 The Subject new; it walk'd the Town a while,
 Numb'ring good intellects; now seldom por'd on.
 Cries the stall-reader, Bless us! what a word on
 A title page is this! and some in file
 Stand spelling fals, while one might walk to
 Mile-End Green. Why is it harder Sirs than
 Gordon, Colkitto, or Macdonnel, or Galasp?
 Those rugged names to our like mouths grow sleek
 That would have made Quintilian stare and gasp.
 Thy age, like ours, O Soul of Sir John Cheke,
 Hated not Learning wors than Toad or Asp,
 When thou taught'st Cambridge and King Edward
 Greek.

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MONUMENT.

"The Monument" (1677) commemorates the Great Fire of London, 1666. An inscription added in 1681, since removed, blamed the fire on Catholic arson. The poet Alexander Pope of that faith took witty revenge in his Moral Essays (1731)...):

Where London's column, pointing at the skies,
Like a tall bully, lifts the head, and lies.

You may wish to climb the 300-odd marble steps, although the view is mostly of high buildings round about. For aught I know, the record set in 1730 by a tavern servant-boy still holds: two and a half minutes and two seconds, round-trip.

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PADDINGTON.

Gilbert-and-Sullivan fans will recall the "keen penetration of Paddington Pollaky" in Patience (1831) -- a topical reference in a Heavy Dragoon patter-song to a private detective operating an agency in the metropolitan borough of Paddington from 1864. He was almost as famous in the London of his day as his fictional successor Sherlock H.

A curious sight is to be seen in a Paddington shop window; the premises were formerly a Methodist

chapel. Thus runs an account in an encyclopedia about the Queen's Road:

a stained glass window in which Anatole France and Bernard Shaw are represented. It depicts the burning of Joan of Arc... Anatole France holds a book, presumably his biography of Joan. On the right of the window is the Bp. of Beauvais, under whom she was handed over to the English. Below him is the monk who repented of his condemnation of Joan, after he had witnessed her death. On the left, holding up the spiritual crown of the Catholic Church, is Pope Benedict XV, under whom, in 1920, Joan was canonized. Below him is the English soldier who, at her request, offered her a cross. The figure at the bottom right-hand corner is Dr. Fulcher, the father of the donor of the window.

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PICCADILLY CIRCUS.

In British usage, "circus" means a circular place where many streets come together; at Piccadilly Circus one of the streets is named Piccadilly. Once again, in Patience (see PADDINGTON), we find an unforgettable bit of fun, a satirical comment on a vogue for aestheticism, especially as manifested in an extravagant interest in the Middle Ages:

If you walk down Piccadilly
With a poppy or a lily
In your medieval hand.

The poetic Bunthorne in this Gilbert-and-Sullivan operetta was lightly modeled on the poet, dramatist, and poseur Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde. The

ineffable Wilde, it is recorded, was paid well to travel to America and walk down Fifth Avenue holding a lily to advertise the opening over here.

Thus does the critic and essayist William Hazlitt describe a night scene hereabouts early in the 1800s:

The finest sight in the metropolis is that of the Mail-Coaches setting off from Piccadilly... that pour down Piccadilly of an evening, tear up the pavement (sic), and devour the way before them to the Land's-End.

Today Hazlitt would surely find the flow of red double-decker buses and coaches of various hues equally enjoyable.

We have already mentioned Piccadilly as a place-name in "Tipperary" (see LEICESTER SQUARE).

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SHOREDITCH.

You will recall (as we professors are wont to say, tongue in cheek, to our students, who are likely not to know something) the onomatopoetic old song about the bells of London. One quatrain goes thus:

"When will you pay me?"
Say the bells of Old Bailey;
"When I get rich,"
Say the bells of Shoreditch.

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ST JAMES'S PARK.

In the Gilbert-and-Sullivan operetta Iolanthe (1882) Lord Tolloller horrifies young Phyllis by asserting that her lover Strephon has been spending time with another young lady - whom we know is actually his mother, a perpetually youthful fairy:

I heard the minx remark
She'd meet him after dark
Inside St James's Park
And give him one!

The last line in its day meant "And give him a kiss."

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ST PAUL'S.

When you emerge from the Underground station for St Paul's, you behold the great cathedral built in the latter quarter of the 17th Century to replace the original destroyed in the Great Fire of London (1666; see MONUMENT). The earlier building is mentioned in the earliest-known English comedy, Nicholas Udall's Ralph Roister Doister (1567):

Yet I look as far beyond the people
As one may see out of the toppe of
St Paul's steeple.

The poet laureate John Dryden, describing the conflagration in Annus Mirabilis (1667), piously blames it on England's political misbehavior:

The daring flames peeped in, and saw from far
 The awful beauties of the sacred quire:
 But, since it was profaned by civil war,
 Heaven thought it fit to have it purged by fire.

John Evelyn the diarist describes the ruins after the fire; he sat on the committee for restoration in the 1660s. The new structure was financed by subscription--and by a duty on coal.

The only tomb to escape the fire was that of the Metaphysical poet John Donne. The first person to be buried in the present St Paul's was its architect, Sir Christopher Wren. And the first monument installed was that of John Howard, famous for prison reform, whose epitaph expressed "respect, gratitude, and admiration"--but to us concentrating on literature it is more interesting to note that the essayist, poet, and dramatist Charles Lamb viewed it differently. Lamb wished to spit upon it, recalling harsh discipline in the late 1700s at the Blue-Coat School for poor boys, which he thought was "a sprout of Howard's brain."

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TEMPLE.

At this stop you will see the Inner and Middle Temples of the Inns of Court, where the legal profession maintains offices and residences. Long ago

there stood here the house or "Temple" of the Knights Templar, with a garden in which William Shakespeare set the scene in Henry VI, Part I (1592), for the plucking of the White Rose of York and the Red Rose of Lancaster that marks the beginning of the Wars of the Roses (1455-1485).

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TOWER HILL.

You of course know something of the history of the Tower of London. Here, for instance, Sir Walter Raleigh, explorer and writer, was imprisoned in 1592 for two long terms, broken awhile to allow him to go a-fighting for the monarch who jailed him.

Gilbert-and-Sullivan enthusiasts will recall the Tower setting in The Yeomen of the Guard (1888).

Here the duke who became Richard III caused the murders of his nephews, two young princes (Edward the V and his brother Richard, Duke of York) in 1483--presented in William Shakespeare's Richard III (1594?).

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VAUXHALL.

A popular place of entertainment in the 18th and 19th Centuries was called Vauxhall Gardens. There's an old song, "Vauxhall in the Morning," and the

Gardens provided the setting for several novels. The essayist and dramatist Richard Steele, in the Tatler which he published early in the 1700s, had his character Sir Roger de Coverley complain that there were to be found "more rowdies than nightingales" at the Gardens. When the novelist Frances ("Fanny") Burney has her heroine Evalina (in the novel of that name, 1778) remark that she has not yet been to the Gardens, a sophisticated friend tells her, "Why, you've seen nothing of London yet!"

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WESTMINSTER.

At the station named Westminster you have come to the end of your ride--and to the tourist center of London. There's of course the Abbey, with the Poet's Corner where are buried many of the major (and minor) British literary figures. At the Abbey, Samuel Pepys the diarist had a strange and gruesome adventure on February 23, 1669: he grabbed a queen and kissed her on the mouth! -- but she was dead, a skeleton with bits of leathery flesh and shreds of clothing, and had lain unburied in her coffin for 200 years. Later she was properly interred. You will remember her as Katharine of Valois, the charming lady who begins to learn

English when victorious King Henry V courts her in William Shakespeare's play (1599). We must add that she had been properly buried in 1437 in a chapel that was torn down some 50 years later. Presumably the coffin in which Pepys found her, covered with loose boards near the King's monument, was not intended to be a permanent desecration, but became a long-perpetuated bureaucratic oversight. Cherchez la femme? Trust Mr Pepys.

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Fittingly we may close our Underground station visit with yet another "G&S" allusion. In Trial by Jury 1875) the Lord Chancellor sings:

In Westminster Hall I danced a dance
 Like a semi-despondent Fury,
 For I thought I would never hit on the chance
 Of addressing a British jury!

The Hall, part of an ancient palace, ceased to serve as a place for courts not long after (1872).

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Your journeys through the breezy tunnels in the chalk beds that underlie the gigantic capital city of England must come to an end. In imagination at least you have been thinking of some of the literary

history that one may attach in the world above to the station names of the London Underground.

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NOTE

I am indebted for most of the information in this paper to three sources: the pamphlet "What's in a Name" (London Transport, date uncertain) and the books An Encyclopedia of London (edited by William Kent, Dent, 1937) and The Oxford Companion to English Literature (edited by Paul Harvey, Oxford, 1932). The only claim I can make for myself is the writing up of that information for onomatologists.