Plagues, Pestilence & Pathology

Dissect London’s medical history and explore streets once plagued by death and disease.
London’s oldest quarter, the City of London, was once completely walled and, as it is today, teeming with life. Across the river, the supply hub of Southwark was the overspill for the City’s vice. Disease was as constant a threat as fire and often more terrifying. Monks and nuns ran ‘hospitals’ – from the Latin *hospitium*, or charitable lodging – and some of London’s most respected modern hospitals, including St Thomas’s and St Bartholomew’s, trace their roots back to these early lodgings.

Following London’s struggle against illness and disease, this walk highlights the journey to improve public health and the treatment of the sick, with its own cast of quacks, visionaries, hypochondriacs and heroes.

Opening hours and prices are correct at the time of printing (March, 2016).
Original site of the Royal College of Physicians ¹

Thomas Linacre, humanist, scholar and physician to King Henry VIII, founded the Royal College of Physicians on this site. Once the royal charter had been issued in 1518, only its members could practise medicine in the City. Linacre qualified as a doctor in the great medical centres of Italy, was a devout Catholic and friend to Thomas More and Erasmus, and, after 11 years as Henry’s physician, resigned to become a priest. After several moves, the College built premises in Regent’s Park in the 1960s. It works to improve diagnosis, patient care and general health in the UK and abroad.

Continue along to Wardrobe Terrace, leading to the church of St Andrew-by-the-Wardrobe. Turn right at the church and walk behind the building, crossing St Andrew’s Hill to the Cockpit pub (note the plaque to Shakespeare on the next building up: he owned a property here, left to his daughter in his will.) Walk along Ireland Yard and cross Playhouse Yard, turning right up Black Friars Lane. On your right is Apothecaries’ Hall.

Apothecaries’ Hall ²

The Worshipful Society of Apothecaries of London is one of over 100 City livery companies that started as trade guilds and whose members wore badged attire, or livery. The hall, on the former site of Blackfriars’ Priory, has been much rebuilt since the Great Fire of 1666. Over the door you’ll see Apollo, the god of healing, slaying the dragon of disease. Above him is a rhinoceros, whose ground horn was thought to have curative properties. The hall once had its own ‘Elaboratory’ for drug manufacture.

Continue uphill, turning right onto Carter Lane. The red and white barbers’ pole at No 79a echoes the ‘blood and bandages’ of the early Barber-Surgeons (see site 14). Take the third left into Dean’s Court. With St Paul’s ahead, turn left to cross at the lights, left again down Ludgate Hill and right into the alley signposted “Stationers’ Hall”.

Stationers’ Hall ³

This livery hall also succumbed to the Great Fire, being rebuilt in 1673. The word ‘stationer’ comes from the stations or stalls set up in nearby St Paul’s Churchyard by medieval scribes and illustrators. The round slate plaque with a sun motif commemorates Wynkyn de Worde, journeyman to the printer William Caxton. He printed over 400 books here in the late 1400s. The stationers also produced medical textbooks; from pop-up anatomy guides to cheap students’ books known as ‘crammers.’ Today, 90% of the 900 members of the Stationers’ Company work in the modern publishing equivalents of communications and content.
Exit the far side of the yard, emerging opposite two spectacular ventilation outlets created by Thomas Heatherwick, who also created the 2012 Olympic Cauldron. Turn left on Ave Maria Lane, later Warwick Lane, and walk up to the redbrick Cutlers’ Hall, just after the entrance to Warwick Square.

**Cutlers’ Hall**

Look up at the terracotta frieze along this fine 1888 livery hall. The sculptor, Benjamin Creswick, came from Sheffield, home of the steel industry. It shows cutlers plying their trade, originally the manufacture of knives, swords and other cutting blades, switching to surgical instruments and domestic tools as demand for weapons diminished. The Cutlers are one of the older livery companies, chartered by Henry V in 1415. To the left is a blue plaque: the Royal College of Physicians stood here from 1674 to 1825 and, in their pre-Great Fire building at Amen Corner, William Harvey first demonstrated the systemic circulation of the blood.

Famous defendants include murderers John Christie and Dr Crippen - the first criminal caught by use of the wireless telegraph – Oscar Wilde and London gangsters the Kray twins. This building opened in 1907, with an extension added in the 1970s. Attend the Public Galleries at the Old Bailey Mon to Fri 9.55am to 12.40pm and 1.55pm to 3.40pm (last admission)

Retrace your steps to Newgate Street, crossing to St Sepulchre’s church on the corner. Walk up Giltspur Street, stopping beside the stone Watch House set into the churchyard wall on your left and dated 1791.

**St Sepulchre Without Newgate**

Imagine an unholy trinity: body snatchers helping themselves to St Sepulchre’s graves; surgeons over the road at St Bartholomew’s Hospital needing bodies for dissection; and buyers, sellers and bodies coming together at the Fortune of War pub up the road (now no longer a pub but an office building marked by the statue of a golden boy). No wonder they needed to keep a 24-hour watch over the graves, until body snatching ended with the Anatomy...
Act of 1832. This gave freer licence to doctors, teachers of anatomy and bona fide medical students to dissect donated bodies. Walk up the same side of the street to see the ‘Golden Boy at Pye Corner,’ symbolising the gluttony held by some to have attracted God’s anger in the form of plague and fire in the 1660s and marks the spot where the Great Fire of London ended.

At the top of the street, cross to a gated archway on your right, topped by a rare public statue of King Henry VIII. This is the entrance to St Bartholomew’s Hospital, or ‘Bart’s’. Walk in and go through a second arch, turning immediately left up the steps to enter the museum.

St Bartholomew’s Hospital Museum
This busy hospital is London’s oldest medical foundation, operating on the same site for nine centuries. When Rahere, courtier to Henry I, fell ill on a pilgrimage to Rome, a feverish dream directed him to found the Priory and Hospital of St Bartholomew. He did so in 1123, just outside the walls of the City of London. Four centuries later, when Henry VIII’s religious reforms threatened the hospital, the King himself granted it to the citizens of London, at their request. What we see today is built around the 18th-century square designed by James Gibbs. Visit the museum for 900 years of history and fine staircase paintings by the artist William Hogarth. Going out the way you came, don’t miss St Bartholomew the Less, just inside the entrance arch, which merged with the priory church as a single parish in 2015.

Open Tue-Fri, 10am-4pm. Free. Tours on Fri, 2pm. £7 (concs £6)

St Bartholomew’s Hospital Museum

The Golden Boy... angel or devil?

Mighty King Henry VIII straddles the arch to Bart’s Hospital

The site of William Wallace’s gruesome execution, now a memorial and source of Scottish pride

The Hogarth Stair (below) was painted in the 1730s by William Hogarth, who was born practically next door. They are in fact canvases, not murals

Smithfield Execution Site
William Wallace, or ‘Braveheart’, a Scottish warrior who rebelled against King Edward I, was brutally executed here in 1305. His body was quartered and sent to four towns in the north; his head spiked on London Bridge as a warning to others. Smithfield has a long association with death: it was a known plague pit and Catholic ‘Bloody Mary’ Tudor is said to have watched the executions of Protestant martyrs from the priory church gatehouse; their memorial is a few metres farther on. For over 700 years it was the site of wild merrymaking during the annual Bartholomew Fair.

Continue in the same direction, passing through the brick and half-timbered gatehouse into the precincts of St Bartholomew the Great.

The Priory Church of St Bartholomew the Great
Founded as an Augustinian Priory, this church has been in continuous use since 1143. All that remains of the once immense building is the former canons’ choir, but it is one of London’s most charming places, with its chequerboard walls, peaceful churchyard and collegiate-style sideways pews. Benjamin Franklin, the American polymath and later inventor of bifocal lenses worked in the print shop set up in the Lady Chapel in the 1720s. His lenses were a revolutionary design that changed the need for visually-impaired people to have multiple pairs of glasses.

Leave the church gatehouse, turn right and cross the road to walk up through the Grand Avenue separating the western and eastern sections of Smithfield Market.

Smithfield, or London Central Markets
Admire the elaborate Victorian ironwork as you walk through London’s only remaining meat market. Every weekday at 2am trucks rumble in with cargoes of cut meat. Until the 1850s, livestock arrived on the hoof, hence nearby road names such as Cowcross, but the live market then moved to Islington for
Exit the market, crossing the traffic triangle into Cowcross Street. Follow this road and as it curves left turn right into tiny Peter's Lane, then left on St John's Lane. Walk up to the gateway at the far end.

St John's Gate and the Museum of the Order of St John

An earlier version of this gate led into the vast complex of the Order of St John, or Knights Hospitaller. It was founded in Jerusalem in the 11th century to give medical help to pilgrims, only later becoming military. Enter the large museum via the door in the gateway. It also includes the Priory Church and crypt over the road in St John's Square. The order still exists as the St John Ambulance (1887), the UK's leading first aid charity, whose volunteers wear the eight-pointed cross worn by early knights, and the Rome-based international medical charity the Sovereign Military Hospitaller Order of St John of Jerusalem, of Rhodes and of Malta.

Opening hours: Mon-Sat (Sun in summer) with tours on Tue, Fri & Sat, 11.30am & 2pm. Free, but £5 donation suggested for tours.

Leave the market, turning right to cross Clerkenwell Road. Walk through the columned entrance on your right to reach the Priory Church. After visiting the church, retrace your steps to turn left on Albemarle Way and right down John Street. At the bottom, turn left on Charterhouse Street and left again, walking up to Charterhouse Square. The Charterhouse gateway is after the hotel on your left.

The Charterhouse, formerly Sutton's Hospital in Charterhouse

This land was a 14th-century plague pit and is one of London’s most significant medieval burial sites. It later housed a Carthusian monastery and school, closed down by King Henry VIII. In 1611 Thomas Sutton, the ‘wealthiest commoner in England,’ left a bequest for the founding of an almshouse for 80 pensioners or ‘Brothers’ and 40 scholars or ‘gownboys’. The school moved in 1872 and its land was given to the Medical College of St Bartholomew’s Hospital, now part of Queen Mary University of London. The almshouse and the Brothers remain.

Charterhouse Brothers lead tours on Tue, Wed, Thu and every other Sat (£10 per person).

Continue around the square. Turn left on Carthusian Street and right at the junction with Aldersgate, using the zebra crossing to reach the far side. Turn right and follow the wall of the Barbican development. When you see a Museum of London sign directing you into a stairwell entrance on your left, walk up the stairs and follow signs to the museum.

Museum of London

This museum charts the city’s history from prehistory to the present with superb collections and its own Centre for Human Bioarchaeology, dealing with the skeletal remains found during excavations. Disease is a common theme through the exhibits, from Roman balm pots and apothecaries’ display jars to Charles Booth’s 1887 Map of Poverty. The Plague Gallery shows that the Black Death of 1348 and the Great Plague of 1665 were just two of some 40 outbreaks of bubonic plague in London over the centuries.

Admission free, with a charge for special/temporary exhibits.
Turn left out of the museum and follow the High Walk until a view opens up on your left: you can see the Barbican development, the tower of St Giles Cripplegate and a remnant of the medieval city wall. The yellowbrick Barber-Surgeons’ Hall is to the right.

**Barber-Surgeons’ Hall**

A livery hall has stood here since the 1440s. Today’s hall dates from 1969 but retains many treasures, including a Holbein portrait of Henry VIII, during whose reign the roles of the Barbers and Surgeons separated (though both were still allowed to pull teeth!) The Barbers’ surgical role dates from a 13th-century ban on persons in holy orders practising medicine, so monastery barbers, accustomed to blades, undertook minor procedures.

Retrace your steps, turning left to cross the bridge over London Wall (a busy road) and descending to ground level. Turn right and right again down Noble Street, past a fragment of the City’s Roman wall. Cross Gresham Street, passing Goldsmiths’ Hall. The road, now Foster Lane, passes the Church of St Vedast, restorer of sight. Cross to New Change, with St Paul’s Cathedral on your right, and over Cannon Street to follow Distaff Lane down and right to Carter Lane and Peter’s Hill. Turn left towards the Millennium Bridge.

**Millennium Bridge**

Crossing the Thames, look left to Tower Bridge at the southeast corner of the City, and right to Blackfriars Bridge at its western edge. The river beneath you became so clogged with effluent in the 1858 ‘Great Stink’ that Parliament could no longer sit. Joseph Bazalgette, chief engineer to the Metropolitan Board of Works, embanked both sides of the river, building mighty sewers, making a major contribution to public health and becoming perhaps one of London’s greatest unsung heroes.

As you double back off the bridge, with Tate Modern behind you, turn right onto Bankside, passing Shakespeare’s Globe and following the walkway under Southwark Bridge. Continue past the Anchor Pub, bearing left into Clink Street and the dark alleys of Southwark, London’s medieval ‘Sin City’. Walk until a replica of Sir Francis Drake’s ship, the Golden Hinde II, comes into view and stop by the sunken remains of a palace on your right.

**Bishop of Winchester’s Palace**

Now in ruins, this Great Hall with its prestigious rose window and contemporary planting once buzzed with guests of the Bishop of Winchester, whose palace precincts included a wharf and the Clink Prison. The Bishop took a percentage of revenues from the shadowy activities taking place down here, including prostitution. The women were nicknamed ‘Winchester Geese’ and had, it is said, their own burial ground on unconsecrated ground at Redcross Way, a short walk south of here.

**Southwark Cathedral**

This exterior is largely 19th century, but the church occupies the site of the ancient parish of St Mary Overie (‘over the river’). It has some wonderful monuments and a busy schedule of services. Walk up the nave, turning left at the crossing. On the back wall of the North Transept is a tomb topped by a bewigged figure. This is Lionel Lockyer, physician, and on his death in 1672 he was celebrated thus: ‘His virtues and his PILLS are soe well known../That envy can’t confine them vnder stone./But they’ll survive his dust and not expire/Till all things else at th’universall fire…’

Admission free but please respect services. Donations welcome.
From the Cathedral’s south door, turn left on Cathedral Street and into Borough Market. This modern food market has an ancient history and exceptional range of British and international produce. Continue along Bedale Street to Borough High Street, crossing to St Thomas Street opposite. After 20 metres, turn left into the church.

The Old Operating Theatre, Museum and Herb Garret
This 18th-century church was once part of St Thomas’s Hospital. ‘Tommy’s’, as it is affectionately known, is now further west in Lambeth, but was founded here by Augustinians in order to look after the poor and sick. The hospital apothecary dried his herbs in this tower, which later became an operating theatre. The 1820s surgical table, with its observation gallery, is the oldest of its type in Europe. Don’t miss the Pathology Trail and amputation kits.
Museum open daily. Admission £6.50 adults.

Guy’s Hospital & Chapel
The central statue is Thomas Guy, who made a fortune in a notorious early 18th-century investment scandal, the South Sea Bubble. With the money he founded a hospital for ‘incurables’ on land owned by St Thomas’s. Walk up the steps of the 1720s building ahead, passing the wood and glass doors of a room known as ‘The Spit’ (it may once have been a tuberculosis ward where patients spat blood). In the grassy courtyards beyond, a statue of Keats sits in an alcove from old London Bridge on your left, benefactor Lord Nuffield stands on your right, and a blue plaque states that the philosopher Wittgenstein worked here in the 1940s. Return to the front courtyard, turning left into the 1780s hospital chapel with its John Bacon relief of Guy ushering the sick into his new building. He is buried in a vault below.

Across the Courtyard from the Chapel, the current student union building is under redevelopment as the Science Gallery London, due to open in 2017. The Gallery is already working on a programme of events that will see the courtyard cleared for exhibition and event space, a theatre and a deliciously healthy café. In the lead up to opening, keep an eye out for pop-up installations from the Gallery on site.
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