

Crane Court

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What makes Crane Court stand out among all the little lanes and alleyways that line Fleet Street – mostly along its north side – is that it looks the least interesting and yet arguably possesses the most fascinating history.

Stand at its entrance just east of Fetter Lane and you are struck instantly with how boring it doesn't mind seeming. Its covered entrance sports a poster for an Indian restaurant hidden up along its course, and its pavement plaque says nothing about anything that happened over Crane Court's rich history. It marks the launch of Fleet Street's first newspaper: The London Courant appeared in 1702 but was published somewhere else: at the other end of Fleet Street.

Perhaps you would set out on your journey with your curiosity sharpened if someone were to tell you that your walk begins pretty much where one of London's gallows stood for over a century. On the lists of London's startlingly many such sites, the gallows at Fetter Lane are often described as being little-known – certainly a curious fact considering its busy location and the fact that it stood there from at least 1590 to 1723. At the turn of the eighteenth century, when the famous scientist and mathematician Sir Isaac Newton was walking his colleagues up Crane Court to show them the new premises he had found for the fledgling Royal Society, they would have had to walk by these gallows. Moving in 1710 into a house that had been built at the end of the court by one of London's most famous developers, "the world's oldest scientific academy still in existence" was to stay there for seven decades. And by the time they decamped to the Strand's Somerset House, those gallows had gone. Civilisation had progressed beyond needing to hang those people it didn't like.

The twin engines of politics and printing ensured that history proceeded in the 18th century along pretty rumbustious paths, even without those gallows. Political reformer John Wilkes lived a particularly edgy life: the mere fact of his having been seen walking into the house of printer Dryden Leach (first house on the right as you enter from Fleet Street, the house since rebuilt) was enough for the authorities to pry the wretched printer out of his bed in the middle of the night under suspicion of printed seditious material.

Of the two men caught up in this tumult, the scoundrel/hero John Wilkes secured a happier passage into posterity: he is one of a small number of people to have secured a full-length statue in this area – just walk out of the top of Crane Court, turn right and a two-minute walk up Fetter Lane will bring you to one of London's most eloquent statues. Like its real-life subject, this Wilkes talks – and talks to great effect.

Two of the most famous names in English magazine publishing were launched in successive years from printers midway up Crane Court: Punch Magazine came first, in 1841, building on the fine publishing traditions of satire and illustrative genius, and revolutionising both over the next 150 years. The following year saw the appearance of the Illustrated London News, which pioneered the fusion of photographs and the printed word: its photo-journalism provided an invaluable record of the history of Empire's heyday and its decline, itself disappearing for good in 2003.

Get to the top of Crane Court and look back along its length. You may spot something you missed as you walked through the archway from Fleet Street. The lantern that shone at one end of Crane Court when the Royal Society was

meeting at the other is memorialised today by a small orrery over the archway. The light seen back then by Newton, Christopher Wren and three succeeding generations of scientists is like all such illuminations throughout history: there, but you need to look for it.



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Additional notes

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Additional notes