

Dr Johnson

VOL. 1 - No. 15

THE HERITAGE of FLEET STREET

LONDON 2022

If you found yourself on Fleet St 250 years ago you might have seen a large, tall man walking along. You would notice him as he sometimes makes strange movements or creates patterns with his steps. His clothes are shabby and his wig singed at one side where he has held a book and candle close to his eyes at night as his eyesight is poor.

Perhaps he is returning to his lodgings nearby from the Fleet Market with oysters for his cat or he might be going to his publisher in Paternoster Row or the office of the Gentleman's Magazine at St John's Gate to hand in his latest piece. If he was walking from the west, he might have attended a service in St Clement Danes or bought tea at Twinings. He could be visiting a fellow writer languishing in the Fleet prison or be hurrying to a good dinner and evening of lively discussion with friends at one of the many inns and taverns on Fleet St: The Mitre, The Devil, The Fountain (in the building now known as Prince Henry's Room), The Old Cheshire Cheese.

He is Samuel Johnson, sometimes tired of life but never tired of London. The first piece he wrote when he arrived in London in 1737 was a poem entitled, 'London'. It got him noticed but another ten years of drudgery and poverty would pass before he signed the contract to write a dictionary. This gave him enough money to rent his first Fleet St house: 17 Gough Square with its large attic room which could be set up to hold all the books, papers and secretaries needed to produce the dictionary. From then until his death 28 years later in rooms just round the corner in Bolt Court, he lived in lodgings close to Fleet St.

The house in Gough Square is open to the public and retains much from the time when Johnson lived there. He must have drawn the heavy bolts across the front door, struggled to get up and down the steep stairs to the basement kitchen and escaped for a breath of fresh air in the tiny garden when dictionary writing got too much.

Johnson and Fleet Street served each other well. He was able to make his living as a writer in the burgeoning world of printing, publishing and bookselling which flourished between the two centres of literate customers: the clergy of St Paul's and the lawyers in the inns of court. The astonishing variety of his output (poems, reviews, obituaries, sermons, magazine articles, biography, travel writing, translation, essays, a play, a novel, the dictionary) gave the publishers plenty to print.

Money troubles were never far away and in 1758 he gave up Gough Square and moved to rooms at Staple Inn and then Greys Inn before arriving at 1 Inner Temple Lane where he paid 16 guineas a year for three dark and dingy rooms. It was here that he prepared his critical edition of Shakespeare. One of the buildings further down the Lane is named Dr Johnson's Buildings and the grave of his friend, Oliver Goldsmith, is next to the Temple Church.

The next move in 1765 took him north of Fleet St again to lodgings in Johnson's Court, named after an earlier owner. There are eight alleyways which run north from Fleet St in this area and at the entrance to each one a plaque commemorates an aspect of the printing industry. The one at Johnson's Court is a facsimile of the page from the dictionary.

Johnson's final lodging was in Bolt Court where he wrote 'The Lives of the English Poets', a collection of biographies of 52 poets. He died at Bolt Court in December 1784. His body was taken on a cart along Fleet St for an autopsy at Hunter's School of Anatomy before burial in Westminster Abbey.



The attic room in Gough Square where Johnson created his dictionary. His portrait hangs on the wall



Dr Johnson's house in Gough Square.



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Additional notes

Prepared by:

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Further Reading:

The World in Thirty Eight Chapters or Dr Johnson's Guide to Life
Dr Johnson's Dictionary: the Extraordinary Story of the Book that Defined the World

Dr Johnson's House home page www.drjohnsonshouse.org

Additional notes: