

The River Fleet

The River Fleet is only 5 miles long, rising from the Whitestone Pond in ampstead to join the Thames near Blackfriars Bridge. There is a very good description, including a detailed walking guide and maps in London's Lost Rivers by Tom Bolton (<http://strangeattractor.co.uk/shoppe/londons-lost-rivers/>), from which this page is abstracted with permission.

This page starts at Faringdon Station. The Fleet Telephone exchange was built here in 1923. oyster shells were unearthed in the foundations, recalling John Gay's eighteenth century description of oyster tubs in rows along the Fleet Ditch.

This area was well-known for its cluster of prisons, with both the medieval Ludgate Prison and its successor Newgate Gaol (on the site of the Old Bailey) further up the river bank. On the left side of the road was the

Fleet Prison built during the twelfth century, burned down three times: during the Peasant's Revolt, in the Great Fire and again during the Gordon Riots. The prison was contained within the Liberty of the Fleet, an area beyond the authority of the City. This led to a boom in unlicensed Fleet Marriages. Until the 1753 Marriage Act ended the industry, as many as thirty couples, often runaways, married here every day. The Earl of Surrey, John Donne, William Wycherley, Hogarth's Tom Rakewell, and Mr Pickwick all spent time in the Fleet Prison. The prison was demolished in 1846.

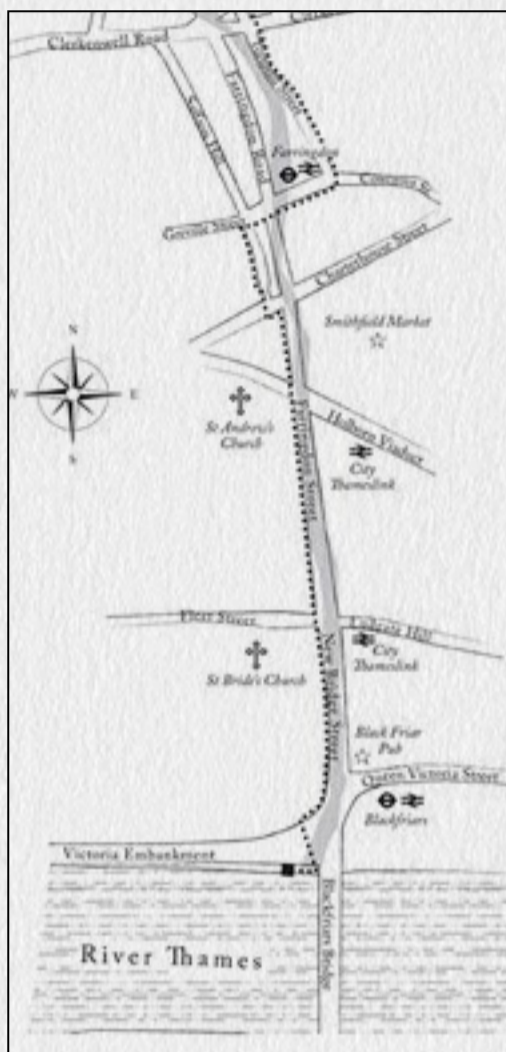
Continue along Farringdon Street as it crosses Ludgate Circus and becomes New Bridge Street.

Ludgate Circus is an ancient crossing point, where a ford took Fleet Street across the river. It was replaced by a bridge in 1197. Wren built four bridges over the Fleet after the Great Fire, at Holborn, Fleet Lane, Fleet Street, and Bridewell. Stones from his Fleet Street Bridge were re-discovered in 1999, embedded in the Fleet sewer under Ludgate Circus.

New Bridge Street was built in 1765 from Fleet Street to the Thames, covering over the remaining stretch of Wren's New Canal.

Bridewell Lane marks the site of a holy well dedicated to St Bride.

On the other side of Bridewell Lane are the offices of Bark and Co Solicitors. Their building is the original prison gatehouse and gate of Bridewell Prison. On the site was Bridewell Palace, built for Henry VIII in 1515 and named after a holy well dedicated to St Bride. It was the



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location for Holbein's painting, The Ambassadors. Edward VI later donated it to the city for use as a prison. The prison closed in 1855 and the Tudor building was pulled down in the 1860s, leaving only the gatehouse.

Until the dissolution of the monasteries in 1536, the mouth of the Fleet was dominated by two large religious institutions, the Whitefriars Monastery on the right and the Blackfriars Monastery on the left.

Whitefriars was founded in the thirteenth century by a colony of hermits driven from Mount Carmel in the Holy Land. After dissolution, the site of the monastery became the Liberty of Whitefriars, also known as Alsatia because of parallels with the much fought-over region between France and Germany. It was exempt from the jurisdiction of either the City or the Temple authorities, a practically self-governing enclave that provided a refuge for criminals and those escaping arrest.

Opposite Bark and Co, cross the road and turn right on the other side, walking along to the Black Friar pub.

The Black Friar, London's only Art Nouveau pub, features a mosaic over the entrance illustrating

the monastery and the Fleet. It is on part of the site of Blackfriars Monastery, built in 1221. It was used during the fourteenth century as a meeting place for Parliament, the Privy Council and the Archbishop of Canterbury's Council. John Wycliffe was denounced for heresy at a hearing in the monastery, and Katherine of Aragon's divorce trial took place in Blackfriars Hall.

After dissolution, buildings on the site were converted into an indoor theatre used by Burbage, Shakespeare and the King's Men. The area became home to artists and writers, including Shakespeare, who lived in one of the old monastery gatehouses.

Opposite, a narrow side street called Watergate marks the old line of the river bank where Bridewell Prison's river gate stood. Between here and the Thames is the Victoria Embankment, completed by Sir Joseph Bazalgette in 1870.

Bazalgette, designer of the London sewer system, introduced the three cross-town sewers that still drain away much of the Fleet's flow – the High-Level Sewer which intercepts the Fleet at King's Cross, the Middle-Level Sewer at Holborn, and the Low-Level Sewer at Blackfriars. The road was built over the sewer and the District line, and the buried Fleet crosses underneath in a storm drain. The sewers containing the Fleet at Blackfriars are a complex, multi-layered underground system with storm relief tunnels fourteen feet high, closed by three-tonne metal doors that are flipped open when the storm water comes rushing through.



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Additional notes

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