

Twitter Thread by Tom Holland



Tom Holland

[@holland_tom](#)



To the Victoria Embankment, there to take our Government-mandated exercise by following the lines of two waterways, the Bloomsbury Ditch & the #CockAndPye Ditch. These were channels which drained the marshland that surrounded the village of St Giles - current-day Covent Garden.

The walk is one devised by [@teabolton](#) in the second volume of his guide to London's lost rivers, & follows the line of the 2 linked ditches from the Thames at Victoria Embankment Gardens & then back to Cleopatra's Needle. #CockAndPye

London's Lost Rivers

A Walker's Guide

Volume Two



Tom Bolton

"With no known natural watercourses between the Fleet, to the east, and the Tyburn, to the west, Covent Garden and Soho are gaps in the London river map. It is, however, quite possible that the ditches rechannelled small streams that existed

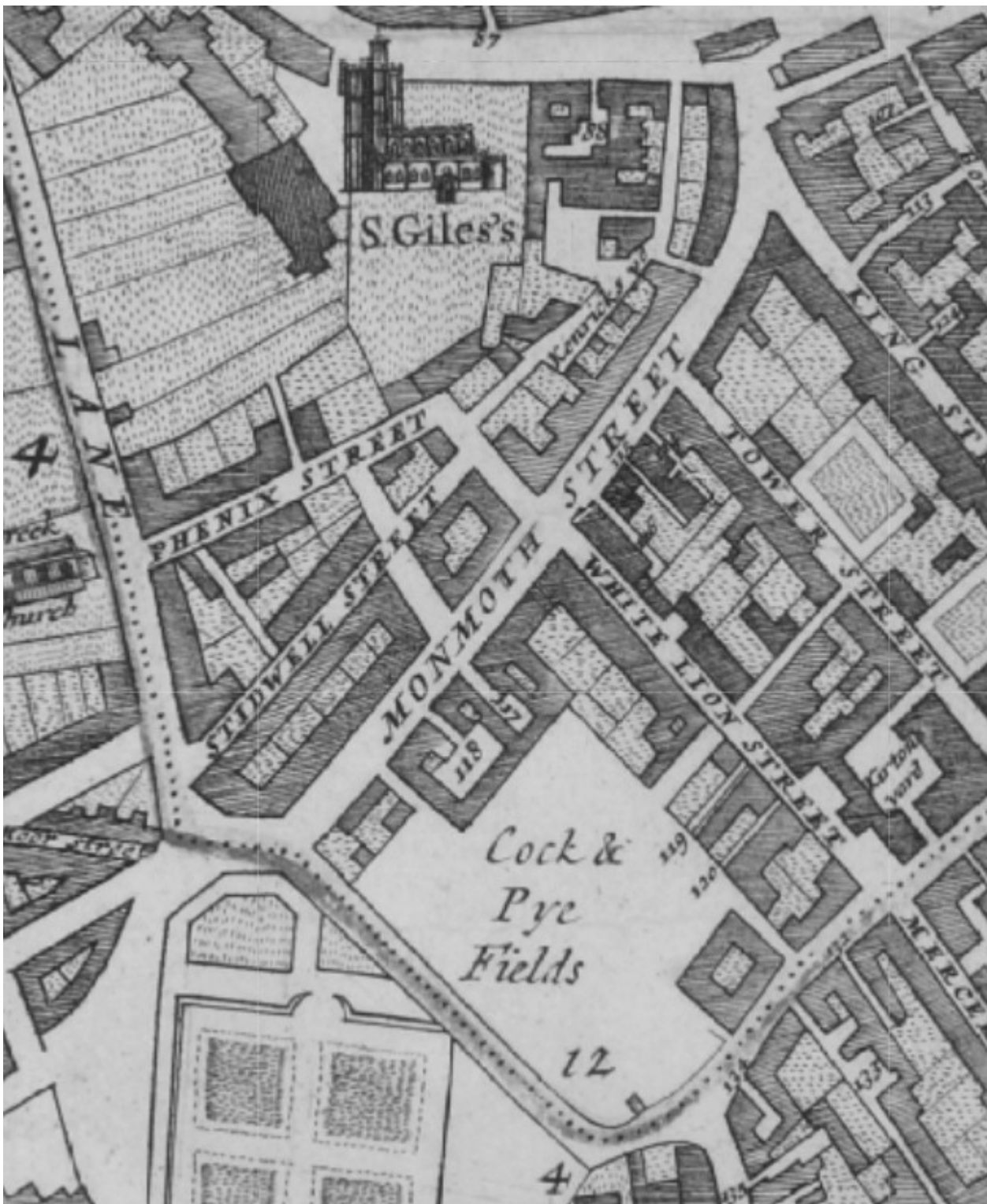
before the earliest maps" - [@teabolton](#)

The fields of St Giles-in-the-Fields were notoriously boggy. St Giles itself stood by the main London-Oxford road (as in Oxford Street), but was sufficiently isolated that when, c. 1120, Henry I's wife Matilda founded a monastery here, it doubled as a hospital for lepers.

St Giles always had a marsh-tang of misery & sedition about it. It remained a leper colony - on & off - until the Reformation, & was the centre of Sir John Oldcastle's Lollard rebellion in 1414. (Sir John was executed at what's now the Oxford St-Tottenham Ct Rd x-roads in 1417.)

Despite still being "wet & soggy ground bordered by many ditches," St Giles nevertheless began to be swallowed up by the expansion of London & Westminster. In 1606, it was condemned as "deepe foul & dangerous." In 1665 the Great Plague started there. #CockAndPye

By the mid-17th century, the only open ground left was the boggy expanse that is now 7 Dials. Recorded on a map of 1658 as 'Marshland', it had become, by 1682, '#CockAndPye Fields'.



#CockAndPye (originally Peacock Pye, or perhaps Cock & Magpye) derives from the name of a tavern which stood in what is now Upper St Martin's Lane. Cock & Pye Fields was built over in the 1690s, when the area was developed by the MP Thomas Neale.

The #CockAndPye Ditch, which had surrounded Marshland like a moat, was built over at the same time. Much of its course to the Thames had already been culverted, & in the 1760s some of its flow had been diverted into another waterway, the Bloomsbury Ditch.

"The Bloomsbury Ditch, also known as Bloomsbury Great Ditch or the Southampton sewer, is part of a system of connected drains that separated the parishes of St Giles & Bloomsbury, & continued to act as a boundary as the city developed" -

To trace these ancient drains, then, is to be taken back to a time when Covent Garden & 7 Dials were notorious slums, the breeding grounds of disease & misery - or, before they were built up, to a time when they were marshes so lonely that they served as the haunt of lepers.



Noon

(And here, reaching back even further in time, to the Ice Age, is the geological perspective: <https://t.co/NjREJsJQEd>)

The geology map explains how the West End through to Holborn sit on a great citadel of dry ice age Thames gravels (containing mammoth, elephant and even hippo) defined the Fleet and the Westbourne. The Tyburn will cut through in the next Ice Age maybe. [#PalaeoLondon pic.twitter.com/TUH20IfYfw](https://twitter.com/TUH20IfYfw)

— Dr Matt Pope \U0001f499 (@MatthewPope) [January 17, 2021](#)

As we approach Victoria Embankment Gardens, there to join with the Bloomsbury Ditch, we are reminded by crossing Waterloo Bridge that there is one London river that has very much not been lost...



The Bloomsbury Ditch originally emptied into the Thames at the foot of what is now Strand Lane. Today, it joins Joseph Bazalgette's sewer, completed in 1870, & contained within the Victoria Embankment, which obliterated the original shoreline of the Thames.



The Bloomsbury Ditch flowed down what is now Strand Lane, and in the 17th century was crossed by a bridge which joined the respective gardens of Somerset House & Arundel House. The sense of a river valley is still strongly preserved. The surrounding streets are much higher.



The Strand crossed the Ditch here, between St Mary-le-Strand St & what is now Australia House. In the 18th century its banks were so busy with prostitution that Boswell could barely be kept away from them.



Australia House, I learn from [@teabolton](#), “is built over a well which can be accessed through a manhole cover in the basement. This is probably St Clement’s Well, 1st recorded in the 1100s, where on Maundy Thursday “newly baptised converts appeared, dressed in white robes.”

Holywell St, named after St Clement’s Well, & part of a warren of slums, was demolished in the 1890s & replaced by the dreary Edwardian architecture of the Aldwych. The street had been notorious for its “2nd-hand booksellers & chemists of doubtful repute”, ie pornographers...

In 1857, a letter to The Times described Holywell Street as “the most vile street in the civilised world.”

The Bloomsbury Ditch flows under Drury Lane, & had flowed there - according to a sewers commissioner in 1671 - “from time whereof the memory of man was not to the contrary.”



Here, where Shelton Street joins Drury Lane is where the Bloomsbury Ditch was joined by the #CockAndPye Ditch. Ahead, in the 17th century, lay the Marshland, which in the second half of the 17th century became Cock & Pye Fields, & then in

turn the slums of 7 Dials



Neal Street runs over the eastern edge of the rectangle that was the #CockAndPye Fields, & was moated on all 4 sides by the Ditch. Sir Thomas Neale, the Stuart MP who developed the area as 7 Dials, was a man of ferocious energy: Master of the Mint, gambler, entrepreneur...



"A small oblong grille at the entrance of Mercer Street is a sign of water beneath."



West Street, home of the Ivy & - for the past 750 years - The Mousetrap is so called because, duh, it's the western edge of the Marshland/Cock & Pye Fields. It runs, in other words, over the #CockAndPye Ditch.



Here stood the #CockAndPye Inn!



Below St Martin's Lane, the #CockAndPye Ditch flows down towards the Thames...



The side alleys and courts leading down onto St Martin's Lane make evident what I had never previously realised - that they were once the banks of a ditch

'We are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars.'

Perfect that Maggi Gambling's statue of Oscar Wilde is literally situated over a ditch... #CockAndPye



Buckingham Street, dropping from the Strand to the Thames runs parallel to the last stretch of the #CockAndPye Ditch. A formidable number of famous people once lived here...



The York Watergate, built in 1626 to a design perhaps by Inigo Jones, looking towards what, in the early 19th century, was Hungerford Stairs, where the young Charles Dickens worked - to enduringly traumatic effect - in a blacking factory.



The York Watergate was left marooned inland by the development of the Victoria Embankment, which covers the huge sewer running parallel to the Thames into which the #CockAndPye Ditch now flows...



And there it is - journey's end! #CockAndPye

