

BACKGROUND

HISTORY

London's history has been a long and turbulent two millennia in which many different settlements and long-established villages slowly grew together to form the immense city around the Roman core that still marks London's heart today.

LONDINIUM

The Romans are the real fathers of London, despite there being a settlement of some form or another along the Thames for several thousand of years before their arrival. Amazingly, the Roman wall built around the settlement of Londinium still more or less demarcates the City from neighbouring municipal authorities today.

The Romans first visited in the 1st century BC, traded with the Celts and had a browse around. In AD 43 they returned with an army led by Emperor Claudius and decided to stay, establishing the port of Londinium. They built a wooden bridge across the Thames (near the site of today's London Bridge) and used the settlement as a base from which to capture other tribal centres, which at the time provided much bigger prizes. The bridge became the focal point for a network of roads fanning out around the region, and for a few years the settlement prospered from trade.

This growth was nipped in the bud around AD 60 when an army led by Boudicca, queen of the Celtic Iceni tribe based in East Anglia, took violent retribution on the Roman soldiers, who had abused her family and seized their land. The Iceni overran Camulodunum (Colchester) – which had become capital of Roman Britannia – and then turned on Londinium, massacring its inhabitants and razing the settlement. Boudicca was eventually defeated (and according to legend is buried under platform 10 of King's Cross station), and the Romans rebuilt London around Cornhill.

A century later the Romans built the defensive wall around the city, fragments of which survive. The original gates – Aldgate, Ludgate, Newgate and Bishopsgate – are remembered as place names in contemporary London. Excavations in the City suggest that Londinium, a centre for business and trade although not a fully-fledged *colonia* (settlement), was an imposing metropolis whose massive buildings included a basilica, an amphitheatre, a forum and the governor's palace.

By the middle of the 3rd century AD Londinium was home to some 30,000 people of various ethnic groups, and there were temples dedicated to a large number of cults. When Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity in 312, this became the official religion of the entire empire, although the remains of the Temple of Mithras (see p116) survive in the City, a testament to London's pagan past.

Overstretched and worn down by ever-increasing barbarian invasions, the Roman Empire fell into decline, as did Londinium. When the embattled Emperor Honorius withdrew the last soldiers in 410, the remaining Romans scurried and the settlement was reduced to a sparsely populated backwater.

TIMELINE

43

The Romans invade Britain, led by Emperor Claudius himself. Before this time the Britons paid tribute to Rome following an early incursion here by Julius Caesar in 55 and 54 BC.

47–50

The defensive fort at Londinium is built. The name Londinium is probably pre-Celtic and there is no evidence as to what it means, although 'settlement on the wide river' is one suggestion.

122

Emperor Hadrian pays a visit to Londinium and a large number of impressive municipal buildings are constructed. This is the height of Roman London and the settlement features temples, bathhouses, a fortress and a port.

190–225

London Wall is constructed around Londinium to defend the settlement from outsiders, who had breached Hadrian's Wall. The wall encloses an area of just 132 hectares and is 5m high.

410

The Emperor Honorius decrees that the colony of Britannia should take care of its own defences, thus effectively ending the Roman presence in Londinium; while many Romans leave, many also stay.

852

Vikings settle in London, having attacked the city a decade previously. This is a period of great struggle between Wessex and Denmark for control of the Thames.

LUNDENWIC

What happened to London after the Roman withdrawal is still the subject of much historical debate. While the Dark Ages have become considerably better illuminated in the past two decades with archaeological finds and improved technology, there remain several key unknowns including whether or not the Roman walled city was ever entirely abandoned. Most historians now think that some form of Romano-British continuity survived even as Saxon settlers established themselves throughout the southeast of England.

Lundenwic (or London marketplace) was established due west of Londinium (around Aldwych) as a Saxon trade settlement and by the early 7th century the Saxons were converted from paganism to Christianity. Rome designated Lundenwic as a diocese and the first St Paul's Cathedral was established at the top of Ludgate Hill.

Saxon settlement was predominantly outside the city walls to the west, towards what is now Aldwych and Charing Cross, but the settlement became the victim of its own success when it attracted the Vikings of Denmark, who raided the city in 842 and burned it to the ground 10 years later. Under the leadership of King Alfred the Great of Wessex, the Saxon population fought back, drove the Danes out in 886 and re-established what soon became Lundunburg as the major centre of trade.

Saxon London grew into a prosperous and well-organised town divided into 20 wards, each with its own alderman, and resident colonies of German merchants and French vintners. But the Danes wouldn't let it lie, and Viking raids finally broke the weakening Saxon leadership, which was forced to accept the Danish leader Canute as king of England in 1016.

With the death of Canute's son Harthacanute in 1042, the throne passed to the Saxon Edward the Confessor, who went on to found an abbey and palace at Westminster on what was then an island at the mouth of the River Tyburn (which now flows underground). When Edward moved his court to Westminster, he established divisions that would – geographically, at least – dominate the future of London. The port became the trading and mercantile centre (the area now known as the City), while Westminster became the seat of politics and administration.

THE NORMANS

The most famous date in English history, 1066 marks the real birth of England as a unified nation state. After the death of Edward the Confessor in 1066 a dispute over who would take the English throne spelled disaster for the Saxon kings. Harold Godwinson, Earl of Wessex, was anointed successor by Edward on his deathbed, but this enraged William, the duke of Normandy, who believed Edward had promised him the throne. William mounted a massive invasion of England from France and on 14 October defeated Harold at the Battle of Hastings, before marching on London to claim his prize. William the Conqueror was crowned king of England in Westminster Abbey on December 25 1066, ensuring the Norman conquest was complete. He subsequently found himself in control of what was by then the richest and largest city in the kingdom.

William distrusted 'the fierce populace' of London and built several strongholds, including the White Tower, the core of the Tower of London. Cleverly, he kept the prosperous merchants on side by confirming the City's independence in exchange for taxes. Sometime following the Norman conquest, London became the principal town of England, overtaking Winchester, the ancient capital of Wessex.

MEDIEVAL LONDON

Successive medieval kings were happy to let the City of London keep its independence as long as its merchants continued to finance their wars and building projects. When Richard I (known as 'the Lionheart') needed funds for his crusade to the Holy Lands, he recognised the City as a self-governing commune, and the appreciative merchants duly coughed up. The City's first mayor, Henry Fitz Aylwin, was elected sometime around 1190. A city built on money and commerce, London would always guard its independence furiously, as Richard's successor, King John, learned the hard way. In 1215 John was forced to cede to the powerful barons, and to curb his excessive demands for pay-offs from the City. Among those pressing him to seal the Magna Carta of 1215 (which effectively diluted royal power) was the then powerful mayor of the City of London. The British Library holds two copies of the Magna Carta (see p167).

Trade and commerce boomed, and the noblemen, barons and bishops built lavish houses for themselves along the prime real estate of the Strand, which connected the City with the Palace of Westminster, the new seat of royal power. The first stone London Bridge was built in 1176, although it was frequently clogged, and most people crossed the river with waterboatmen (who plied their trade until the 18th century). Their touting shouts of 'Oars? Oars?' are said to have confused many a country visitor tempted by more carnal services.

Though fire was a constant threat in the cramped and narrow houses and lanes of 14th-century London, disease caused by unsanitary living conditions and impure drinking water from the Thames was the greatest threat to the burgeoning city. In 1348, rats on ships from Europe brought the Black Death, a bubonic plague that wiped out almost two-thirds of the population (of 100,000) over the following decades.

With their numbers subsequently down, there was growing unrest among labourers, for whom violence became a way of life, and rioting was commonplace. In 1381, miscalculating – or just disregarding – the mood of the nation, Richard II tried to impose a poll tax on everyone in the realm. Tens of thousands of peasants, led by the soldier Wat Tyler and the priest Jack Straw, marched in protest on London. The archbishop of Canterbury was dragged from the Tower and beheaded, several ministers were murdered and many buildings were razed before the Peasants' Revolt ran its course. Tyler died at the end of the mayor's blade, while Straw and the other ringleaders were executed at Smithfield. However, there was no more mention of poll tax (until Margaret Thatcher, not heeding the lessons of history, tried to introduce one in the 1980s – see p28).

London gained wealth and stature under the Houses of Lancaster and York in the 15th century, also the era of the charitable mayor Dick Whittington, immortalised for many children in the fairy tale of his rise to power from poverty. William Caxton set up the first printing press at Westminster in 1476.

The century's greatest episode of political intrigue occurred in 1483. The 12-year-old Edward V, of the House of York, reigned for only two months before vanishing with his younger brother into the Tower of London, never to be seen again. Whether or not their uncle Richard III – who became the next king – murdered the boys has been the subject of much conjecture over the centuries. (In 1674 workers found a chest containing the skeletons of two children near the White Tower, which were assumed to be the princes' remains and were reburied in Innocents' Corner in Westminster Abbey.) Richard III didn't have long to enjoy the hot seat, however, as he was deposed within a couple of years by Henry Tudor, the first monarch of the dynasty of that name.

886

King Alfred the Great, first King of England, reclaims London for the Saxons and founds a new settlement within the walls of the old Roman walls.

1016

After more than a century of English rule, the Danes return to London and Canute is crowned king of England. Most famous in English folklore for failing to command the waves, Canute ushered in two decades of peace.

1066

After his great victory over King Harold at the Battle of Hastings, William, Duke of Normandy, evermore known as William the Conqueror, is crowned in Westminster Abbey.

1215

In a meadow in Runnymede, outside London, King John signs the Magna Carta (literally 'the great charter'), an agreement with England's barons forming the basis of constitutional law in England.

1397

Richard Whittington is elected mayor of London, and instantly negotiates buying the city's liberties back from Richard II for £10,000. He goes on to be four times mayor of London and a much-loved character in London folklore.

1534

After being denied a divorce from Catherine of Aragon by the Pope, Henry VIII splits with the Catholic Church, dissolves the monasteries and brings about the English Reformation.

TUDOR LONDON

London became one of the largest and most important cities in Europe during the reign of the Tudors, which coincided with the discovery of the Americas and thriving world trade.

Henry's son and successor, Henry VIII, was the most ostentatious of the clan. Terribly fond of palaces, he had new ones built at Whitehall and St James's, and bullied his lord chancellor, Cardinal Thomas Wolsey, into gifting him Hampton Court.

His most significant contribution, however, was the split with the Catholic Church in 1534 after the Pope refused to annul his marriage to the nonheir-producing Catherine of Aragon. Thumbing his nose at Rome, he made himself the supreme head of the Church of England and married Anne Boleyn, the second of his six wives. He 'dissolved' London's monasteries and seized the church's vast wealth and property. The face of the medieval city was transformed; much of the land requisitioned for hunting later became Hyde, Regent's and Richmond Parks, while many of the religious houses disappeared, leaving only their names in particular areas, such as Whitefriars and Blackfriars (after the colour of the monks' habits).

Despite his penchant for settling differences with the axe (two of his six wives and Wolsey's replacement as lord chancellor, Thomas More, were beheaded) and his persecution of both Catholics and fellow Protestants that didn't toe the line, Henry VIII remained a popular monarch until his death in 1547.

The reign of Mary I, his daughter by Catherine of Aragon, saw a brief return to Catholicism, during which the queen sanctioned the burning to death of hundreds of Protestants at Smithfield and earned herself the nickname 'Bloody Mary'.

By the time Elizabeth I, Henry VIII's daughter by Anne Boleyn, took the throne, Catholicism was a waning force, and hundreds of people who dared to suggest otherwise were carted off to the gallows at Tyburn (p145).

ELIZABETHAN LONDON

The 45-year reign (1558–1603) of Elizabeth I is still looked upon as one of the most extraordinary periods in English history, and it was just as significant for London. During these four decades English literature reached new and still unbeaten heights; religious tolerance gradually became accepted doctrine, although Catholics and some Protestants still faced persecution. England became a naval superpower, having defeated the Spanish Armada in 1588; and the city established itself as the premier world trade market with the opening of the Royal Exchange in 1566.

London was blooming economically and physically; in the second half of the 16th century the population doubled to 200,000. The first recorded map of London was published in 1558, and John Stow produced *A Survey of London*, the first history of the city, in 1598.

This was also the golden era of English drama, and the works of William Shakespeare, Christopher Marlowe and Ben Jonson packed them in at new playhouses such as the Rose (built in 1587) and the Globe (1599). Both of these were built in Southwark, a notoriously 'naughty place' at the time, teeming with brothels, bawdy taverns and illicit sports such as bear baiting. Most importantly, they were outside the jurisdiction of the City, which frowned upon and even banned theatre as a waste of time.

When Elizabeth died without an heir in 1603, she was succeeded by her second cousin, who was crowned James I. Although the son of Catholic Mary, Queen of Scots, James was slow to improve conditions for England's Catholics and drew their wrath. He narrowly escaped death

when Guy Fawkes' plot to blow up the Houses of Parliament on 5 November 1605 was uncovered. The discovery of the audacious plan is commemorated on this date each year with bonfires, fireworks and the burning of Guy Fawkes effigies throughout England.

THE ENGLISH CIVIL WARS

When Charles I came to the throne in 1625 his intransigent personality and total belief in the 'divine right of kings' set the monarchy on a collision course with an increasingly confident Parliament at Westminster and a City of London tiring of extortionate taxes. The crunch came when Charles tried to arrest five antagonistic MPs who fled to the City, and in 1642 the country slid into civil war.

The Puritans, extremist Protestants and the City's expanding merchant class threw their support behind general Oliver Cromwell, leader of the Parliamentarians (the Roundheads), who battled against the Royalist troops (the Cavaliers). London was firmly with the Roundheads, and Charles I was defeated in 1646, although a Second Civil War (1648–49) and a Third Civil War (1649–51) continued to wreak havoc on what had been a stable and prosperous nation.

The outcome of the English Civil War was short-lived. Charles I was beheaded for treason outside Banqueting House (see [p105](#)) in Whitehall on 30 January 1649, famously wearing two shirts on the cold morning of his execution so as not to shiver and appear cowardly.

Cromwell ruled the country as a republic for the next 11 years, during which time Charles I's son, Charles II, continued fighting for the restoration of the monarchy. During the Commonwealth of England, as the English Republic was known, Cromwell banned theatre, dancing, Christmas and just about anything remotely fun.

THE RESTORATION: PLAGUE & FIRE

After Cromwell's death, Parliament decided that the royals weren't so bad after all and restored the exiled Charles II in 1660. Death was deemed too good for Cromwell, whose exhumed body was hung, drawn and quartered at Tyburn. His rotting head was displayed on a spike at Westminster Hall for two decades.

Despite the immense wealth that London experienced during the reign of the Tudors, the capital remained a crowded and filthy place where most of the population lived below the poverty line. A lack of basic sanitation (urine and faeces were routinely poured into the streets from the slop bucket), dirty water and overcrowding had all contributed to recurrent outbreaks of deadly illnesses and fevers. The city had suffered from outbreaks of bubonic plague since the 14th century, but all previous incidences were dwarfed by the Great Plague of 1665.

As the plague spread, the panicked population retreated behind closed doors, only venturing out for supplies and to dispose of their dead. Previously crowded streets were deserted, the churches and markets were closed, and an eerie silence descended on the city. To make matters worse, the mayor believed that dogs and cats were the spreaders of the plague and ordered them all killed, thus in one stroke ridding the disease-carrying rats of their natural predators. By the time the winter cold arrested the epidemic, 100,000 people had perished; the corpses were collected and thrown into vast 'plague pits', many of which stand empty of buildings to this day.

The plague finally began to wane in late 1665, leaving the city's population decimated and a general superstition that the deaths had been a punishment from God for London's moral

squalor. Just as Londoners breathed a sigh of relief, another disaster struck. The city had for centuries been prone to fire, as nearly all buildings were constructed from wood, but the mother of all blazes broke out on 2 September 1666 in a bakery in Pudding Lane in the City.

It didn't seem like much to begin with – the mayor himself dismissed it as 'something a woman might pisse out' before going back to bed – but the unusual September heat combined with rising winds created a tinderbox effect, and the fire raged out of control for days, razing some 80% of London. Only eight people died (officially at least), but most of London's medieval, Tudor and Jacobean architecture was destroyed. The fire was finally stopped at Fetter Lane, on the very edge of London, by blowing up all the buildings in the inferno's path. It is hard to overstate the scale of the destruction – 89 churches and more than 13,000 houses were razed, leaving tens of thousands of people homeless. Many Londoners fled for the countryside, or to seek their fortunes in the New World.

WREN'S LONDON

One positive aspect of the inferno was that it created a blank canvas upon which master architect Christopher Wren could build his magnificent churches. Wren's plan for rebuilding the entire city was unfortunately deemed too expensive, and the familiar pattern of streets that had grown up over the centuries since the time of the Romans quickly reappeared (by law, brick and stone designs replaced the old timber-framed, overhanging Tudor houses, to avoid a repeat of 1666; many roads were widened for the same reason). At this time, Charles II moved to St James's Palace, and the surrounding area was taken over by the gentry, who built the grand squares and town houses of modern-day Mayfair and St James's in order to be close to the court.

By way of memorialising the blaze – and symbolising the restoration and resurgence of the subsequent years – the Monument ([p117](#)), designed by Wren, was erected in 1677 near the site of the fire's outbreak. At the time it was by far the highest structure in the city, visible from everywhere in the capital.

In 1685 some 1500 Huguenot refugees arrived in London, fleeing persecution in Catholic France. Many turned their hands to the manufacture of luxury goods such as silks and silverware in and around Spitalfields and Clerkenwell, which were already populated with Irish, Jewish and Italian immigrants and artisans. London was fast becoming one of the world's most cosmopolitan places.

The Glorious (ie bloodless) Revolution in 1688 brought the Dutch king William of Orange to the English throne. He relocated from Whitehall Palace to a new palace in Kensington Gardens, and the surrounding area smartened itself up accordingly. In order to raise finances for his war

OF RAKES & HARLOTS: HOGARTH'S WORLD

William Hogarth (1697–1764) was an artist and engraver who specialised in satire and what these days might be considered heavy-handed moralising on the wages of sin. His plates were so popular in his day that they were pirated, leading Parliament to pass the Hogarth Act of 1735 to protect copyright. They provide invaluable insights into the life – particularly the poor variety – of Georgian London. Hogarth's works can be seen in Sir John Soane's Museum ([p87](#)) in Holborn, Hogarth's House ([p206](#)) in Chiswick, the Tate Britain ([p103](#)) and the National Gallery ([p75](#)).

1558

The first detailed map of London is commissioned by a group of German merchants. In the same year the Elizabethan age begins when Queen Elizabeth takes the throne.

1599

The Globe Theatre opens in Southwark alongside other London stages including the Rose, the Swan and the Hope. Most of Shakespeare's plays written after 1599 are staged here including *Macbeth*, *King Lear* and *Hamlet*.

1605

A Catholic plot to blow up James I by hiding gunpowder in the cellars under the House of Commons is foiled. Guy Fawkes, just one of the plotters, is executed in 1606.

1665

The Great Plague ravishes London and wipes out a fifth of the capital's population. Although it had a far smaller effect than the Black Death of the 14th century, it is remembered as one of Europe's last outbreaks.

1666

The Great Fire of London burns for five days, destroying the city Shakespeare had known and loved and changing London forever, leaving four-fifths of the metropolis in ruins.

1707

The first ever sitting of the Parliament of the Kingdom of Great Britain occurs in London as the 1707 Acts of Union bring England and Scotland together under one parliament.

with France – and as a result of the City's transformation into a centre of finance rather than manufacturing – William III established the Bank of England in 1694.

London's growth continued unabated, and by 1700 it was Europe's largest city, with 600,000 people. The influx of foreign workers brought expansion to the east and south, while those who could afford it headed to the more salubrious environs of the north and west. London today is still, more or less, divided along these lines.

The crowning glory of the 'Great Rebuilding', Wren's St Paul's Cathedral (p109), was completed in 1710 – one of the largest cathedrals in Europe and one of the city's most prominent and visible landmarks to this day.

GEORGIAN LONDON

When Queen Anne died without an heir in 1714, the search began for a Protestant relative (the 1701 Act of Settlement forbade Roman Catholics to occupy the throne). Eventually George of Hanover, the great-grandson of James I, arrived from Germany and was crowned king of England, though he never even learned to speak English. Meanwhile, the increasingly literate population got their first newspapers, which began to cluster around Fleet St.

Robert Walpole's Whig Party controlled Parliament during much of George I's reign, and Walpole effectively became Britain's first prime minister. He was presented with 10 Downing St, which has been the official residence of nearly every prime minister since.

London grew at a phenomenal pace during this time, and measures were taken to make the city more accessible. When Westminster Bridge opened in 1750 it was only the second spanning of the Thames after London Bridge, first built by the Romans. The old crossing itself was cleared of many of its buildings, and the Roman wall surrounding the City torn down.

Georgian London saw a great creative surge in music, art and architecture. Court composer George Frederick Handel wrote his *Water Music* (1717) and *Messiah* (1741) while living here, and in 1755 Dr Johnson produced the first English dictionary. William Hogarth (see boxed text, p23), Thomas Gainsborough and Joshua Reynolds produced some of their finest engravings and paintings, and many of London's most elegant buildings, streets and squares were erected or laid out by the likes of John Soane and the incomparable John Nash (p80).

All the while, though, London was becoming ever more segregated and lawless. George II himself was relieved of 'purse, watch and buckles' during a stroll through Kensington Gardens. This was Hogarth's London, in which the wealthy built fine mansions in attractive squares and gathered in fashionable new coffee houses while the poor huddled together in appalling slums and drowned their sorrows with cheap gin.

To curb rising crime, two magistrates established the 'Bow Street Runners' in 1749, a voluntary group – effectively a forerunner to the Metropolitan Police Force (set up in 1829) – that challenged the official marshals (thief-takers) who were suspected (often correctly) of colluding with the criminals themselves.

In 1780 Parliament proposed to lift the law preventing Catholics from buying or inheriting property. One demented MP, Lord George Gordon, led a 'No Popery' demonstration that turned into the Gordon Riots. A mob of 30,000 went on a rampage, attacking Irish labourers, and burning prisons, 'Papishe dens' (chapels) and several law courts. At least 300 people died during the riots, including some who drank themselves to death after breaking into a Holborn distillery, and the army managed to restore order only after five days of rioting.

As the 18th century drew to a close, London's population had mushroomed to almost a million.

INVASION OF THE BODY SNATCHERS

During the 18th and 19th centuries, as the understanding of anatomy and surgery advanced, there was a huge shortage of bodies on which doctors and students could experiment. Legally, only the corpses of executed criminals were fair game for the scalpel, but the demand for specimens far outstripped supply, leading to the rise of the notorious body snatchers, or resurrectionists. Gangs of men would surreptitiously remove recently interred bodies from their graves, replacing everything as they found it, so in many cases the relatives never found out. In fact, though horrific, the practice was not even illegal, as by law the human body was not a possession and thus taking it could not be deemed stealing. The area around St Bart's hospital was notorious for this practice, with entire gangs emptying local graveyards. However, the strongly held belief that the human body had to be intact to enter heaven meant that, when body snatchers were discovered, they were often on the receiving end of mob justice and torn to pieces on the streets. This macabre practice ended only after the Anatomy Act of 1832, which relaxed conditions for the medical uses of corpses.

VICTORIAN LONDON

While the growth and achievements of the previous century were impressive, they paled in comparison with the Victorian era, which began when the 19-year-old Victoria was crowned in 1838. During the Industrial Revolution, when small 'cottage' industries were suddenly overtaken by the advance of the great factories, spurring the creation of the first industrialised society on earth, London became the nerve centre of the largest and richest empire the world has ever known, one that covered a quarter of the earth's surface area and ruled more than 500 million people.

New docks in East London were built to facilitate the booming trade with the colonies, and railways began to fan out from the capital. The world's first underground railway opened between Paddington and Farringdon Rd in 1863 and was such a success that other lines quickly followed. Many of London's most famous buildings and landmarks were also built at this time: the Clock Tower (popularly known as 'Big Ben', 1859; see Houses of Parliament, p102), Royal Albert Hall (1871; p144) and the magnificent Tower Bridge (1894; p123).

The city, however, heaved under the burden of its vast size, and in 1858 London found itself in the grip of the 'Great Stink', when the population explosion so overtook the city's sanitation facilities that raw sewage seeped in through the floorboards of wealthy merchants' houses. Leading engineer Joseph Bazalgette tackled the problem by creating in the late 1850s an underground network of sewers, which would be copied around the world. London had truly become the first modern metropolis.

Though the Victorian age is chiefly seen as one of great imperial power founded on industry, trade and commerce, intellectual achievement in the arts and sciences was enormous. The greatest chronicler of the times was Charles Dickens, whose *Oliver Twist* (1837) and other works explored the themes of poverty, hopelessness and squalor among the working classes. In 1859 Charles Darwin published the immensely controversial *On the Origin of Species* here, in which he outlined his still-contentious theory of evolution.

This was also the era of some of Britain's most capable and progressive prime ministers, most notably William Gladstone (four terms between 1868 and 1894) and Benjamin Disraeli (who served in 1868 and again from 1874 to 1880).

1749

The Bow Street Runners are established by the novelist and magistrate Henry Fielding to replace the previous 'thief-takers' who would arrest criminals for a small fee.

1807

The Houses of Parliament finally abolish the slave trade, on which much Georgian wealth has been built, after a long and hard-fought campaign led by politician and philanthropist William Wilberforce.

1838

The coronation of Queen Victoria at Westminster Abbey ushers in the greatest period in London's history, during which the British capital becomes the economic and political centre of the world.

1884

Greenwich Mean Time is established, making Greenwich Observatory the centre of world time, against which all clocks around the globe are set.

1901

Queen Victoria dies after a reign of more than 63 years – the longest (so far) in British history. As Victoria was averse to black funerals, London is instead festooned in purple and white.

1908

London hosts its first Olympic Games, in the now demolished White City Stadium. A total of 22 teams take part and the entire budget is £15,000.

Waves of immigrants, from Chinese to Eastern European, arrived in London during the 19th century, when the population exploded from one million to six million people. This breakneck expansion was not beneficial to all – inner-city slums housed the poor in atrocious conditions of disease and overcrowding, while the affluent expanded out to leafy suburbs, where new and comfortable housing was built. The suburbs of London are still predominantly made up of Victorian terrace housing.

Queen Victoria lived to celebrate her Diamond Jubilee in 1897, but died four years later aged 81 and was laid to rest in Windsor. Her reign is seen as the climax of Britain's world supremacy, when London was the de facto capital of the world.

FROM EMPIRE TO WORLD WAR

Victoria's self-indulgent son Edward, the Prince of Wales, was already 60 by the time he was crowned Edward VII in 1901. London's *belle époque* was marked with the introduction of the first motorised buses, which replaced the horse-drawn versions that had plodded their trade since 1829, and a touch of glamour came in the form of luxury hotels such as the Ritz in 1906 and department stores such as Selfridges in 1909. The Olympics were held at White City in 1908.

What became known as the Great War (WWI) broke out in August 1914, and the first German bombs fell from zeppelins near the Guildhall a year later, killing 39 people. Planes were soon dropping bombs on the capital, killing in all some 650 Londoners (half the national total of civilian casualties).

While the young, moneyed set kicked up their heels after the relative hardships of the war, the 'roaring '20s' brought only more hardship for most Londoners, with an economic slump increasing the cost of living.

The population continued to rise, reaching nearly 7.5 million in 1921. The London County Council (LCC) busied itself clearing slums and building new housing estates, while the suburbs encroached ever deeper into the countryside.

Unemployment rose steadily as the world descended into recession. In May 1926 a wage dispute in the coal industry escalated into a nine-day general strike, in which so many workers downed tools that London virtually ground to a halt. The army was called in to maintain order and to keep the city functioning, but the stage was set for more than half a century of industrial strife.

Despite the economic woes, the era brought a wealth of intellectual success. The 1920s were the heyday of the Bloomsbury Group, which counted writer Virginia Woolf and economist John Maynard Keynes in its ranks. The spotlight shifted westwards to Fitzrovia in the following decade, when George Orwell and Dylan Thomas clinked glasses with contemporaries at the Fitzroy Tavern on Charlotte St.

Cinema, TV and radio arrived, and the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) aired its first radio broadcast from the roof of Marconi House on the Strand in 1922, and the first TV programme from Alexandra Palace 14 years later.

The royal family took a knock when Edward VIII abdicated in 1936 to marry a woman who was not only twice divorced but, heaven save us, an American. The same year Oswald Mosley attempted to lead the British Union of Fascists on an anti-Jewish march through the East End but was repelled by a mob of around half a million at the famous Battle of Cable St.

WWII & THE BLITZ

Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain's policy of appeasing Adolf Hitler during the 1930s eventually proved misguided as the Führer's lust for expansion could not ultimately be sated. When Germany invaded Poland on 1 September 1939, Britain declared war, having signed a mutual-assistance pact with the Poles a few days beforehand. WWII (1939–45), Europe's darkest hour, had begun.

The first year of the war was one of anxious waiting for London; although more than 600,000 women and children had been evacuated to the countryside, no bombs fell to disturb the black-out. On 7 September 1940 this 'phoney war' came to a swift and brutal end when the German Air Force, the Luftwaffe, dropped hundreds of bombs on the East End, killing 430 people.

The Blitz (from the German '*blitzkrieg*' for 'lightning war') lasted for 57 nights, and then continued intermittently until May 1941. The Underground was turned into a giant bomb shelter, although one bomb rolled down the escalator at Bank station and exploded on the platform, killing more than 100 people. Londoners responded with legendary resilience and stoicism. The royal family – still immensely popular and enormously respected – were also to play their role, refusing to leave London during the bombing. Begged to allow her children to leave the capital, Queen Elizabeth (the present monarch's late mother) apparently replied, 'The children could not possibly go without me, I wouldn't leave without the King, and the King won't leave under any circumstances'. The king's younger brother, the Duke of Kent, was killed in active service in 1942, while Buckingham Palace took a direct hit during a bombing raid, famously prompting the Queen to announce that 'now we can look the East End in the face'. Winston Churchill, prime minister from 1940, orchestrated much of the nation's war strategy from the Cabinet War Rooms (see p104) deep below Whitehall, and it was from here that he made his stirring wartime speeches.

The city's spirit was tested again in January 1944, when Germany launched pilotless V-1 bombers (known as doodlebugs) over the city. By the time Nazi Germany capitulated in May 1945, up to a third of the East End and the City had been flattened, 32,000 Londoners had been killed and a further 50,000 had been seriously wounded. The scale of the destruction can only really be felt by taking a walk around the City – where postwar buildings (many of them monstrous) have been erected, this is where German bombs hit.

POSTWAR LONDON

Once the celebrations of Victory in Europe (VE) day had died down, the nation faced the huge toll that the war had taken. The years of austerity had begun, with much rationing of essential items and high-rise residences being built on bomb sites in Pimlico and the East End to solve the capital's chronic housing problem. Hosting the 1948 Olympics and the Festival of Britain in 1951 boosted morale. The festival recalled the Great Exhibition of a century earlier, with a new complex of arts buildings, the South Bank Centre (p313), built on the site of the festival.

The gloom returned, quite literally, on 6 December 1952 in the form of the Great Smog, the latest disaster to beset the city. A lethal combination of fog, smoke and pollution descended, and some 4000 people died of smog-related illnesses. This led to the 1956 Clean Air Act, which introduced zones to central London where only smokeless fuels could be burned.

Rationing of most goods ended in 1953, the year the current queen, Elizabeth II, was crowned following the death of her much-loved father King George VI the year before.

1936

George IV becomes king following the abdication of his brother, Edward VIII, who chooses to give up his throne for Wallis Simpson, an American divorcee who will never be acceptable to the British establishment.

1940–41

London is devastated by the Blitz, although miraculously St Paul's Cathedral and the Tower of London escape the bombing unscathed.

1953

Queen Elizabeth II's coronation is held at Westminster Abbey, the first major live event to be broadcast around the world on TV, and one for which many English families bought their first TV sets.

1956

Red Routemaster double-decker buses make their first appearance in London and instantly become an iconic symbol of the city. They are now only in use on two 'heritage routes' (the 15 and the 9).

1959

The Notting Hill Carnival is started by Claudia Jones to promote good race relations in West London following the race riots of 1958 in which the local white and African Caribbean community clashed violently.

1966

England beats Germany to win the World Cup at Wembley – possibly the greatest day in the history of British sport and one seared into the consciousness of every schoolboy.

Immigrants from around the world – particularly the former British colonies – flocked to postwar London, where a dwindling population had led to labour shortages. The city's character changed forever. However, as the Notting Hill race riots of 1958 attest, despite being officially encouraged to come, new immigrants weren't always welcomed on the streets.

Some economic prosperity returned in the late 1950s, and Prime Minister Harold Macmillan told Britons they'd 'never had it so good'. London was the place to be during the 1960s when the creative energy that had been bottled up in the postwar era was spectacularly uncorked. London became the epicentre of cool in fashion and music, and the streets were awash with colour and vitality. The introduction of the contraceptive pill, legalisation of homosexuality and the popularisation of drugs such as marijuana and lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD) through the hippy movement created an unprecedented permissive and liberal climate, outraging the conservative older generations and delighting the young. Two seminal events were the Beatles recording at Abbey Rd and the Rolling Stones performing free in front of half a million people in Hyde Park. Carnaby St was the most fashionable place on earth, and pop-culture figures from Twiggy and David Bailey to Marianne Faithfull and Christine Keeler became the icons of the new era.

PUNK LONDON

The party didn't last long, however, and London returned to the doldrums in the harsh economic climate of the 1970s, a decade marked by unemployment and Irish Republican Army (IRA) bombs. But, ever thriving on adversity, London ensured it was at the centre of the world's attention when in the mid-1970s a new aesthetic, punk, came vomiting and swearing into sight.

Despite the sexual liberation of the swinging '60s, London had remained a relatively conservative place, and the generation that had witnessed flower power as kids suddenly took things a step further, horrifying *Daily Mail* readers with strategically placed safety pins, dyed hair, mohawks and foul language. Punk was born – Vivienne Westwood shocked and awed the city with the wares from her clothing shop, Sex, on King's Rd, while the Sex Pistols' alternative national anthem, 'God Save the Queen', released during the national celebrations for Queen Elizabeth's Silver Jubilee in 1977, was more outrageous than anything the '60s had come up with.

While the music and fashion scene was in overdrive, torpor had set into Britain's body politic, as demonstrated by the brief and unremarkable Labour premiership of James Callaghan (1976–79). He was seen as weak and in thrall to the all-powerful trade unions, who crippled the UK with strikes in the late 1970s, most significantly during the 'Winter of Discontent' in 1978–79.

THE THATCHER & MAJOR YEARS

Recovery began – at least for the business community – under the iron fist of Margaret Thatcher, the leader of the Conservative Party, who was elected Britain's first female prime minister in 1979. Her monetarist policy created a canyon between rich and poor, while her determination to crush socialism and shut down huge swathes of Britain's outdated manufacturing industry sent unemployment skyrocketing. Her term was marked by rioting and unrest, most famously in Brixton in 1981 and Tottenham in 1985. Hugely popular abroad and largely reviled in her own country by anyone with a social conscience, Thatcher was nonetheless one of the most notable prime ministers of recent times.

The Greater London Council (GLC), under the leadership of 'Red' Ken Livingstone, proved to be a thorn in Thatcher's side and fought a spirited campaign to bring down the price of public transport. Thatcher responded in 1986 by abolishing the GLC, leaving London as the only European capital without a local government. The GLC wouldn't resurface for another 14 years, during which many of London's problems from transport to housing became entrenched.

While poorer Londoners suffered under Thatcher's assault on socialism, things had rarely looked better for the wealthy. Riding on a wave of confidence partly engendered by the deregulation of the Stock Exchange in 1986, London underwent explosive economic growth. New property developers proved to be only marginally more discriminating than the Luftwaffe, though some outstanding modern structures, including the Lloyd's of London building (p117), went up amid all the other rubbish.

Like previous booms, the one of the late 1980s proved unsustainable. As unemployment started to rise and people found themselves living in houses worth much less than what they had paid for them, Thatcher introduced a flat-rate poll tax. Protests around the country culminated in a 1990 march on Trafalgar Sq that ended in a fully-fledged riot. Thatcher's subsequent forced resignation brought to an end a divisive era in modern British history, and her roundly derided successor, her former Chancellor of the Exchequer, John Major, employed a far more collective form of government, something that was anathema to Thatcher.

In 1992, to the horror of most Londoners, the Conservatives were elected for a fourth successive term in government, even though the inspiring leadership of Thatcher was gone. The economy went into a tailspin shortly after, and Britain was forced to withdraw from the European Exchange Rate Mechanism (ERM), a humiliation from which it was impossible for the government to recover. To add to the government's troubles, the IRA detonated two huge bombs, one in the City in 1992 and another in the Docklands four years later, killing several people and damaging millions of pounds' worth of property.

BLAIR'S BRITAIN

Inigorated by its sheer desperation to return to power, the Labour Party, having elected the thoroughly telegenic Tony Blair to lead it, managed to ditch some of the more socialist-sounding clauses in its party credo and reinvent itself as New Labour, finally leading to a huge landslide win in the May 1997 general election. The Conservatives were atomised throughout the country, and the Blair era had begun.

Most importantly for London, Labour recognised the legitimate demand the city had for local government, and created the London Assembly and the post of mayor. Despite this laudable attempt to give Londoners back the much-needed representation stolen by Thatcher, Blair quickly discredited himself by attempting to rig the Labour mayoral selection process against New Labour's then *bête noire* Ken Livingstone, former leader of the GLC. Londoners

top picks

HISTORICAL READS

- London: *The Biography* – Peter Ackroyd
- London at War – Philip Ziegler
- London in the Twentieth Century – Jerry White
- The Newgate Calendar – Clive Emsley
- Restoration London, Elizabethan London and Dr Johnson's London – Liza Picard

1979

Margaret Thatcher is elected prime minister. Her radical policies will transform Britain beyond recognition – part much-needed modernisation, part cold-hearted social policy.

1981

Brixton sees the worst race riots in London's history. Lord Scarman, delivering his report on the events, puts the blame squarely on 'racial disadvantage that is a fact of British life'.

1987

A fire, probably started by a dropped match, at King's Cross underground station causes the death of 31 people. While smoking was banned on tube carriages and platforms in 1985, smokers still lit up on escalators.

1990

Britain erupts in civil unrest, culminating in the poll tax riots in Trafalgar Sq. Thatcher's deeply unpopular poll tax is the iron lady's ultimate undoing and she is forced to resign in November.

1997

Labour sweeps to victory after almost two decades of Tory power. Tony Blair's radical relaunch of the once left-wing Labour Party as centrist 'New Labour' gives him a huge landslide with a majority of 179.

2000

Livingstone is elected Mayor of London, despite the government's attempts to shoehorn its own man into the job. Elected as an independent, Livingstone is soon welcomed back to the Labour Party.

THE WORLD IN ONE CITY

London is historically made up of immigrants – whether Roman, Viking, Anglo-Saxon, Norman, Huguenot or Jamaican, the city has always assimilated large numbers of ethnically diverse people. While Africans are well documented to have served in the Roman army, they first came to England in significant numbers as slaves in Elizabethan times. The first truly large influx of foreigners was in the late 17th century, when Huguenots, French Protestant refugees fleeing religious persecution at home, settled in Spitalfields and Soho. Wave upon wave followed. Jews have arrived throughout the past four centuries; their traditional areas have been the East End (particularly Spitalfields and Stamford Hill) and northwest London. The last large group of Jews arrived from India as late as the 1960s. During the potato famine in the mid-19th century there was massive migration from Ireland; Londoners with Irish ancestry remain concentrated in Kilburn today. WWII brought Poles, Ukrainians and other Eastern Europeans to London, and today the Poles are a long-established community in Hammersmith and Shepherd's Bush. The single biggest wave of immigration came in the 1950s, when, facing a labour shortage, the government allowed anyone born in a UK colony to have British citizenship. This brought a huge black population from the Caribbean and a large Asian diaspora from India, Bangladesh and Pakistan. The black population settled in West London and South London, while Asians were concentrated in the East End. Other less noticeable waves include Italians to Clerkenwell in the early 20th century, Vietnamese refugees to Hackney in the 1980s and the Iraqi diaspora that has grown in northwest London since the 1990s. Whoever you are, wherever you're from, you'll feel at home in London.

were incensed at Blair's attempts to parachute his close ally Frank Dobson into the position, and when Livingstone stood as an independent candidate he stormed the contest. However, Livingstone never became the thorn in Blair's side that many predicted. His hugely successful congestion charge has done wonders for the city's traffic flow, and following a quiet readmission to the Labour Party, is looked upon as one of the party's most significant weapons (see the boxed text, p49).

London became the focal point for popular scepticism about the invasion of Iraq in 2003. On 15 February 2003, it saw one of the largest demonstrations in its entire history when more than 750,000 people from all over the UK marched through the city to a mass rally in Hyde Park.

Two years later a far smaller crowd on Trafalgar Sq reacted jubilantly to the announcement on 6 July 2005 by the International Olympic Committee that London would be the first triple Olympic city in history, being awarded the 2012 games – which had been widely tipped to go to Paris. However, London's buoyant mood was shattered the very next morning when terrorists detonated a series of explosions on the city's public transport network killing 52 innocent people. Triumph turned to terror, followed quickly by anger and then defiance.

Despite at one time being the most popular leader in modern British history, by the end of Tony Blair's period in office he was deeply resented and mistrusted by Londoners. Still, Blair was able to choose his departure date from No 10 himself and there was never a serious rebellion against him in the Labour Party despite the mess of Iraq.

LONDON TODAY

Gordon Brown became Prime Minister on 27 June 2007, after a decade serving as Blair's chancellor of the exchequer. Having built up an enviable economic record getting Britain out of its Conservative-era boom and bust cycle, Brown positioned himself as being everything

2003

London's congestion charge is introduced by Livingstone, creating an outcry that soon disappears as London's streets begin to flow smoothly again.

2005

Fifty two people are killed by Muslim extremist suicide bombers attacking the London transport network on 7 July. Two weeks later four more terrorists attempt a similar feat, and fail.

2007

Gordon Brown becomes prime minister after a decade-long wait as Blair's chancellor. The feud between the two men, which has gripped and grid-locked Westminster for years, is finally over.

Blair wasn't – honest, plain speaking and unconcerned with spin. The following weekend two car bombs were found and defused in London, a sobering reminder of the terrorist threat the city still faces on a daily basis and the ongoing quagmire of Britain's involvement in the occupation of Iraq.

On a more prosaic level, public transport continues to be Londoners' most consistent complaint, with Ken's 'bendy buses' still far from loved, although most admit that bus and tube services have improved, prices (for Oyster Card users at least) have gone down, provision for cyclists has massively improved and the East London line extension will bring much-needed new tube stations to Hackney. London's successful bagging of the 2012 Olympic Games means that a vast building programme in East London has rolled into action. Most importantly for Londoners, the games will release money for much-promised new transport routes, including the Crossrail scheme that will see the construction of two brand-new underground train lines linking London's east to its west.

London remains a liberal, left-leaning boomtown. The perennial problems of the capital continue to dominate the local political agenda, but the day-to-day life of London continues to be that of creative maelstrom, financial buoyancy and developmental frenzy, something that it has been famous for since the arrival of its first colonisers.

ARTS

When a disused power station in a run-down part of London was transformed into the Tate Modern back at the turn of the century, few had any idea what a runaway success the gallery would be. Less than a decade later it's London's most visited sight and has inspired a city already laden with artistic merit to even greater heights of ambition. The Tate Modern is just another phase in the artistic and cultural renaissance that began in London during the 1990s with Britpop and the Young British Artists, an unleashing of cultural power into a post-Thatcher vacuum that flourished in Blair's Britain. Whether it be in art, literature, music, fashion, stage or screen, London has always been the artistic centre of the country and, in many ways, of Europe as a whole, particularly throughout the 20th century, when it led the way in music and fashion.

The arts make an important contribution to London's economic success, but it's the quality of life they contribute to that make them so significant – London's staggeringly rich cultural life brings many people here, while for others it's what keeps them in this city that's notoriously expensive and tough to get a break in.

Hollywood stars queue up to tread the boards of the capital's theatres, while London continues to be the heart of English literature, housing both the most innovative publishers in the country and some of writing's greatest stars. While the dust is still settling after the storm of Britain, a generation of less obviously shocking artists is emerging – not to mention a host of new galleries and museums that have opened in the past five years – ensuring that Londoners are still art crazy.

London's actors and actresses are known the world over, and the British film industry still throws out some notable productions, from Oscar-winning Helen Mirren's portrayal of good queen Bess in *The Queen* to the comic brilliance of *A Cock and Bull Story* and blockbusters such as the Harry Potter and James Bond series. Musically, the city is making a comeback from the post-Britpop torpor that set in around the turn of the millennium, while remaining one of the best places to see live bands anywhere on earth. London is also a capital of comedy, and its dance companies cut a splendid dash across the world stage.

LITERATURE

Old Literary London

In English literature, London has been portrayed in countless ways over six centuries, from Chaucer to Monica Ali, making a history of London writing a history of the city itself. London has been the inspiration for such timeless masters as Shakespeare, Defoe, Dickens, Thackeray, Wells, Orwell, Conrad, Greene and Woolf, to name but a few. It's hard to reconcile the bawdy

GRUB STREET

Grub St was the original name of a London street (now Milton St, located behind the Barbican) inhabited by impoverished writers and literary hacks. In the 18th century, any inferior book or work of literature was known as 'Grubstreet', but these days – and you shouldn't read anything into this – the term seems to be used for the whole London publishing industry. The London publishing world takes itself extremely seriously, and that's why publications such as *Private Eye* (see boxed text, p52) are so refreshing, always on the lookout for individuals or organisations that are getting too big for their boots.

portrayal of the city in the *Canterbury Tales* with Dickens' bleak hellhole in *Oliver Twist*, let alone Defoe's plague-ravaged metropolis with Zadie Smith's multiethnic romp in *White Teeth*. Ever changing, yet somehow eerily consistent – something brilliantly illustrated in Peter Ackroyd's *London: The Biography* – the capital has left its mark on some of the most influential writing in the English language. What follows is a small selection of seminal moments – you can get a detailed listing in *Waterstone's Guide to London Writing* (£3.99), available at Waterstone's bookshops everywhere.

The first literary reference to the city comes in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, written between 1387 and 1400, where the pilgrims

gather for their trip to Canterbury at the Tabard Inn in Southwark, although sadly the inn burned down in 1676. A blue plaque marks the site of the building today.

William Shakespeare spent most of his life as an actor and playwright in London around the turn of the 17th century, when book publishing was beginning to take off here. He trod the boards of several Southwark theatres and wrote his greatest tragedies – among them *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Macbeth* and *King Lear* – for the original Globe theatre on South Bank. However, although London was his home for most of his life, Shakespeare was an ardent fantasist and set nearly all his plays in foreign or make-believe lands. Even his English historical plays are hardly ever set in the capital; only *Henry IV: Part II* includes a London setting: a tavern called the Boar's Head in Eastcheap.

Daniel Defoe was perhaps the first true London writer, both living in and writing about the city during the early 18th century. Most famous for *Robinson Crusoe* (1720) and *Moll Flanders* (1722), which he wrote while living in Church St in Stoke Newington, Defoe's *Journal of the Plague Year* is nonetheless his most interesting account of London life, documenting the horrors of the Great Plague in London during the summer and autumn of 1665, when the author was a child.

Two early-19th-century poets found inspiration here. John Keats wrote his *Ode to a Nightingale* while living near Hampstead Heath in 1819 and his *Ode on a Grecian Urn* after inspecting the Portland Vase in the British Museum. William Wordsworth visited in 1802 and was inspired to write the poem *On Westminster Bridge*.

Charles Dickens (1812–70) was the definitive London author. When his father and family were imprisoned for not paying their debts, the 12-year-old Charles was forced to fend for himself on the streets of Victorian London. Although his family were released three months later, those grim months were seared into the boy's memory and provided a font of experiences on which he would later draw. His novels most closely associated with the city are *Oliver Twist*, with its story of a gang of boy thieves organised by Fagin in Clerkenwell, and *Little Dorrit*, whose heroine was born in the Marshalsea – the same prison where his family were interned. His later *Our Mutual Friend* is a scathing criticism of contemporary London values – both monetary and social – and a spirited attack on the corruption, complacency and superficiality of 'respectable' London. The Old Curiosity Shop, made famous by the book of the same name, can still be seen standing just off Lincoln's Inn today.

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (1858–1930) portrayed a very different London, and his pipe-smoking, cocaine-snorting sleuth, Sherlock Holmes, came to exemplify a cool and unflappable Englishness the world over. Letters to the mythical hero still arrive at 221b Baker St, where there's now a museum to everyone's favourite Victorian detective.

London at the end of the 19th century is described in a number of books. HG Wells' *The War of the Worlds* wonderfully captures the sense and mood of the times. W Somerset Maugham's first novel, *Liza of Lambeth*, was based on his experiences as an intern in the slums of South London, while *Of Human Bondage*, so English and of its time, provides an engaging portrait of late-Victorian London.

20th-Century Writing

Of the Americans writing about London at the end of the 19th century and start of the 20th century, Henry James, who settled and died here, stands supreme with *Daisy Miller* and *The Europeans*. *The People of the Abyss*, by American socialist writer Jack London, is a sensitive portrait of the poverty and despair of life in the East End. And we couldn't forget Mark Twain's *The Innocents Abroad*, in which the inimitable humorist skewers both the Old and the New Worlds. St Louis-born TS Eliot settled in London in 1915, where he published his poem *The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock* almost immediately and moved on to his ground-breaking epic *The Waste Land*.

The End of the Affair, Graham Greene's novel chronicling a passionate and doomed romance, takes place in and around Clapham Common just after WWII, while *The Heat of the Day* is Elizabeth Bowen's sensitive, if melodramatic, account of living through the Blitz.

Between the wars, PG Wodehouse (1881–1975), the most quintessentially British writer of the early 20th century, depicted the London high life with his hilarious lampooning of the English upper classes in the Jeeves stories. Quentin Crisp, the self-proclaimed 'stately homo of England', provided the flipside, recounting what it was like to be openly gay in the sexually repressed London of the 1920s in his ribald and witty memoir, *The Naked Civil Servant*. George Orwell's experiences of living as a beggar in London's East End coloured his book *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933), while sternly modernist Senate House on Malet St, Bloomsbury, was the inspiration for the Ministry of Truth in his classic dystopian 1949 novel *1984*.

Colin MacInnes described the bohemian, multicultural world of 1950s Notting Hill in *City of Spades* and *Absolute Beginners*, while Doris Lessing captured the political mood of 1960s London in *The Four-Gated City*, the last of her five-book *Children of Violence* series, and provides some of the funniest and most vicious portrayals of 1990s London in *London Observed*. Nick Hornby has found himself the voice of a generation, nostalgic about his days as a young football fan in *Fever Pitch* and obsessive about vinyl in *High Fidelity*.

Before it became fashionable, authors such as Hanif Kureishi explored London from the perspective of ethnic minorities, specifically young Pakistanis in his best-known novels *The Black Album* and *The Buddha of Suburbia* – he also wrote the screenplay for the ground-breaking film *My Beautiful Laundrette*. Author and playwright Caryl Phillips won plaudits for his description of the Caribbean immigrant's experience in *The Final Passage*, while Timothy Mo's *Sour Sweet* is a poignant and funny account of a Chinese family in the 1960s trying to adjust to English life.

The astronomical success of Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary* effectively concluded the genre known as 'chick lit', a series of hugely successful books that were, depending on your perspective, about finding Mr Right or about independent, brassy young women finding their voice. Will Self – *enfant terrible* and incisive social commentator – has been the toast of London for the last decade. His *Grey Area* is a superb collection of short stories focusing on skewed and surreal aspects of the city, while his more recent *The Book of Dave* is the hilarious, surreal story of a bitter, present-day London cabbie (recognisable to anyone who's spent half an hour listening to a rant in transit) burying a book of his own observations only to have it discovered in the future and regarded as scripture by the people on the island of Ham (Britain is an archipelago now due to rising sea levels).

Peter Ackroyd is regarded as the quintessential London author and names the city as the love of his life. *London: The Biography* is his inexhaustible paean to the capital, while his most recent book, *The Clerkenwell Tales*, brings to life the 14th-century London of Chaucer.

PRIZE WRITERS

The Booker Prize is the most important literary-fiction prize in Britain. Since its foundation in 1969 it has only been open to Commonwealth and Irish authors, but new sponsors the Man Group insisted that it be opened to US writers by 2004, drawing uproar from sections of the British media. Despite fears that American competition would lead to no British writer ever winning the prize again, the 2004 Booker went to Londoner Alan Hollinghurst for his *The Line of Beauty*. Any well-read Londoner will have an opinion about the Booker Prize – some rubbish it as a self-promotional tool of publishing houses, while others slavishly read not only the winner but any book to make the short list. Either way, few are indifferent to the prize, and the winner is usually highly indicative of contemporary literary trends in Britain.

Finally, Iain Sinclair is the bard of Hackney, who, like Ackroyd, has spent his life obsessed with and fascinated by the capital. His acclaimed and ambitious *London Orbital*, a journey on foot around the M25, London's mammoth motorway bypass, is required London reading.

The Current Scene

London remains an exciting place for writers and readers alike and is the home of most of the UK's major publishers and its best bookshops. The frustrating predominance of several hugely powerful corporations within publishing, however, is very limiting and there's almost no will within the literary scene to throw off the hegemony of companies far more interested in turning a profit than pioneering good writing.

The frankly sad desperation with which agents and publishers are seeking 'the next big thing' is a total sign of the times. The shape of the industry is best exemplified by the 2000 runaway success *White Teeth*, a dazzling debut novel by Zadie Smith about multiethnic assimilation in North London. This novel propelled Smith, pretty much overnight, from obscurity to being the poster girl for young, hip literary London.

Smith arrived on the scene already represented by a ruthless literary agent who invited publishers to bid for the book on the strength of – not even a full manuscript – a sample of 100 pages. The feeding frenzy that followed has already passed into London legend. Smith fulfilled all the current criteria: as well as being a bloody good writer she was young, gorgeous and multicultural (ie eminently marketable). All the lights lit up and Grub St went into orbit. Penguin finally claimed victory when it paid the *unknown* author £250,000 for the *unknown* book.

As it turned out, Penguin's 'hunch' was spot on; *White Teeth* was fresh, original and generally fabulous, and the publisher made a handsome profit from it and from Smith's somewhat less impressive follow-up, *The Autograph Man*, in 2002. But it's the nature of the first book's publication that characterises London's literary scene right now. Publishers on a quest for the jackpot are shelling out bigger and bigger advances for new books by unknown authors in the hope that they'll uncover 'the next Zadie Smith'. In many cases of course, they don't, but large fees on a few gambles make it harder for other writers with less marketable qualities to get into print.

This sad state of affairs has, however, created an exciting literary fringe, which although tiny, is very active and passionate about good writing. London still has many small presses where quality and innovation are prized over public relations skills and box ticking, and events fizzle away at bookshops and in back rooms of pubs throughout the week.

Back in the mainstream, the big guns of the 1980s such as Martin Amis, Ian McEwan, Salman Rushdie and Julian Barnes are still going strong, although none has produced anything much to get excited about since the late 1990s. Even McEwan's Booker-winning *Saturday* was a fairly underwhelming affair. Rushdie was awarded a knighthood in 2007 for services to literature, which outraged many Muslims who consider his book *The Satanic Verses* to be blasphemous. The award was widely cheered in Britain as a mark of support for freedom of speech, notwithstanding the slight unease with what many in Britain perceive as Rushdie's distancing himself from the UK in recent years, despite being a British citizen and having enjoyed police protection for years at the cost of millions to the British taxpayer.

The current scene is most notable for the wealth of superb children's literature being produced. JK Rowling and Phillip Pullman have between them totally revolutionised the concept of what children's books can be and the reach they can have. The final Harry Potter book came out in summer 2007 amid people queuing for copies for two days in a manner befitting the sale of a supergroups' world tour, and with Rowling famously richer than the Queen, it's safe to say that she won't be worrying about her pension.

That's not to say that new voices haven't broken through in the last decade – indeed, there have been some outstanding new London writers in recent years, from Monica Ali who brought the East End to life in *Brick Lane* to Jake Arnott and his intelligent Soho-based gangster yarn *The Long Firm* and Gautam Malkani's much-hyped *Londonstani*. Other authors worth exploring for a taste of the rising stars of the city's literary scene are Tony White, Martin Millar and Cathi Unsworth.

See the boxed text, [p317](#), for details of readings and spoken-word events around the city.

RECOMMENDED READING

- *Absolute Beginners* (1959; Colin MacInnes) This brilliant novel is a must-read for anyone interested in the youth culture of London during the '50s, particularly the mod scene. It's infinitely more engaging than the film of the same name.
- *Brick Lane* (2003; Monica Ali) This debut novel tells the story of Nazneen, an Islamic Bangladeshi woman who comes to London after an arranged marriage and initially accepts her circumscribed life, before embarking on her own voyage of self-discovery. The author writes with wit and gentle irony.
- *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1991; Hanif Kureishi) This winner of the 1990 Whitbread prize is a raunchy, funny and insightful trawl of the hopes and fears of a group of Asian suburbanites in 1970s London, from the pre-eminent Anglo-Asian voice of his generation.
- *The End of the Affair* (1951; Graham Greene) Set in battle-scarred London at the end of WWII, this intensely emotional classic deals with a three-way collision between love of self, love of another and love of God (coloured by the tension felt by the author between his Roman Catholic faith and the compulsion of sexual passion).
- *Grey Area* (1994; Will Self) Piercing wit, narrative virtuosity and incisive social commentary characterise the writing of Self. In these nine short stories – or 'comic nightmares' – he lays into contemporary London and evokes the most disturbing failings of society.
- *Journal of the Plague Year* (1722; Daniel Defoe) Defoe's classic reconstruction of the Great Plague of 1665 scans the streets and alleyways of stricken London to record the extreme suffering of plague victims. At once grisly and movingly compassionate.
- *The Line of Beauty* (2003; Alan Hollinghurst) A surprise Booker Prize winner in 2004, this account of high society through the eyes of a young gay man in Thatcher's London paints a portrait of a divisive period in modern British history and brings West London society into sharp critical focus.
- *London Fields* (1989; Martin Amis) By using a constantly shifting narrative voice, Amis makes the reader work damn hard for the prize in this middle-class-fear-of-the-mob epic. Dark and postmodern, it is a gripping study of London lowlife.
- *London Observed* (1992; Doris Lessing) A collection of stories from the Iranian-born (and Rhodesian-raised) author, who observes London and its inhabitants with the shrewd and compassionate eye of an artist in 18 sketches of the city.
- *London Orbital* (2002; Iain Sinclair) Sinclair, Hackney's irrepressible voice of dissent, sets off to circumnavigate the capital on foot within the 'acoustic footprints' of the M25; hilarious and insightful.
- *London: The Biography* (2000; Peter Ackroyd) Regarded by some as the definitive history of London, this tome provides a fascinating tapestry of the capital, arranged by theme rather than chronologically.
- *The Long Firm* (2000; Jake Arnott) The first – and best – of a London trilogy set in the seedy world of 1960s Soho. Brutal but often hilarious reading that was made into a compelling British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) drama series too.
- *Mother London* (2000; Michael Moorcock) This engaging, rambling novel follows three mentally disturbed characters who hear voices from the heart of London, providing for an episodic romp through the history of the capital from the Blitz to the end of the 2nd millennium. The city itself becomes a character, along with its outcasts and marginals, all treated with great compassion.
- *Mrs Dalloway* (1925; Virginia Woolf) Bloomsbury Group stalwart Woolf goes full throttle with her stream-of-consciousness style in this story, which follows a day in the life of various people trying to cope in 1923 London. It is beautifully crafted, and as brief as it is exhilarating.
- *The Naked Civil Servant* (1968; Quentin Crisp) This story of an openly gay man in London in the 1920s, a world of brutality and comedy, is told in Crisp's characteristically sarcastic, self-derogatory, bitchy and very funny way.
- *Oliver Twist* (1837; Charles Dickens) Although not necessarily Dickens' best, this moving story of an orphan who runs away to London and falls in with a gang of thieves is beautifully told, with unforgettable characters and a vivid portrayal of Victorian London.
- *White Teeth* (2000; Zadie Smith) Smith's hugely hyped novel is a funny, poignant, big-hearted and affectionate book about friendship and cultural differences, as seen through the eyes of three unassimilated families in North London.

THEATRE

London has more theatrical history than almost anywhere else in the world, and it's still being made nightly on the stages of the West End, the South Bank and the vast London fringe. No visit to the city is complete without taking in a show, and just a walk through 'theatreland' in the West End any evening of the week is an electrifying experience as thousands of people make their way to one of the many venerable dramatic institutions.

Dramatic History

Very little is known about London theatre before the Elizabethan period, when a series of 'playhouses', including the Globe, were built on the south bank of the Thames and in Shoreditch. Although the playwrights of the time – Shakespeare, Christopher Marlowe (*Dr Faustus*, *Edward II*) and Shakespeare's great rival, Ben Jonson (*Volpone*, *The Alchemist*) – are now considered timeless geniuses, theatre then was more about raucous popular entertainment, where the crowd drank and heckled the actors. As venues for such, the playhouses were promptly shut down by the Puritans after the Civil War in 1642.

Three years after the return of the monarchy in 1660, the first famous Drury Lane Theatre was built and the period of 'restoration theatre' began, under the patronage of the rakish Charles II. Borrowing influences from Italian and French theatre, restoration theatre incorporated drama, including John Dryden's 1677 *All for Love*, and comedy. It's the latter, known for its burlesque humour and sexual explicitness, that most holds the attention of today's audiences. During the restoration period the first female actors appeared on stage (in Elizabethan times men played female roles), and Charles II is recorded as having had an affair with at least one, Nell Gwyn.

Despite the success of John Gay's 1728 *Beggar's Opera*, Oliver Goldsmith's 1773 farce *The Stoops to Conquer* and Richard Sheridan's *The Rivals* and *School for Scandal* at Drury Lane, also in the 1770s, popular music halls replaced serious theatre during the Victorian era. Light comic operetta, as defined by Gilbert and Sullivan (*HMS Pinafore*, *The Pirates of Penzance*, *The Mikado* etc), was all the rage. A sea change was only brought about by the emergence at the end of the 19th century of such compelling playwrights as Oscar Wilde (*An Ideal Husband*, *The Importance of Being Earnest*) and George Bernard Shaw (*Pygmalion*).

Comic wits such as Noel Coward (*Private Lives*, *Brief Encounter*) and earnest dramatists such as Terence Rattigan (*The Winslow Boy*, *The Browning Version*) and JB Priestley (*An Inspector Calls*) followed. However, it wasn't until the 1950s and 1960s that English drama yet again experienced such a fertile period as the Elizabethan era.

Perfectly encapsulating the social upheaval of the period, John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* at the Royal Court in 1956 has gone down as generation defining. In the following decade, a rash of new writing appeared, including Harold Pinter's *Homecoming*, Joe Orton's *Loot*, Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* and Alan Ayckbourn's *How the Other Half Loves*. During the same period many of today's leading theatre companies were formed, including the National Theatre under the directorship of Laurence Olivier in 1963.

Although somewhat eclipsed by the National Theatre in the cyclical world of London theatre, today's Royal Court retains a fine tradition of new writing. In the past decade it has nurtured such talented playwrights as Jez Butterworth (*Mojo*, *The Night Heron*), Ayub Khan-Din (*East Is East*), Conor McPherson (*The Weir*, *Shining City*) and Joe Penhall (*Dumb Show*).

For theatre listings, see [p317](#).

The Current Scene

London remains a thrilling place to be for anyone who loves theatre. Nowhere else on earth, with the possible exception of New York, offers such a huge range of high-quality drama, excellent musical theatre and such a sizzling fringe. Whether it's to see Hollywood A-listers gracing tiny stages and earning Equity minimum for their efforts or lavish West End musicals that you'll remember for years afterwards, London remains an undisputed world leader and innovator in the field.

After several terrible years from late 2001, the mainstream West End has re-established its credentials putting on a series of extraordinary hits while the smarter end of the fringe continues to impress with risky, controversial productions that make sure theatre often makes the news. The hottest tickets in town remain those for the National Theatre, which under Nicholas Hytner has gone from strength to strength with productions such as *History Boys*, *Jerry Springer – The Opera*, *Elmina's Kitchen* and *Coram Boy* enjoying huge box-office success coupled with critical acclaim.

Other venues leading the way in innovation are off-West End venues such as the Arcola (the world's first carbon-neutral theatre and home to an alternative opera season called grime-bourne), the Almeida, the Royal Court, the Soho Theatre and the Donmar Warehouse. At the

latter Michael Grandage has recently celebrated five very successful years as artistic director by staging a new production of *Othello* featuring Ewan McGregor as Iago – just another example of the big names it's easy to see any night of the week on London's stage, whether it be Harry Potter star Daniel Radcliffe strutting around naked in *Equus* or the septuagenarian Dame Maggie Smith in side-splitting top form in *The Lady From Dubuque* at the Haymarket.

Perhaps the most significant trend of the past few years, with the Blair administration limping off stage left in 2007, has been the rediscovery of political satire and serious political content in many productions, equally in the West End and on the fringe. David Hare's *Stuff Happens*, about the run-up to the Iraq War, was staged at the National, as was a highly political new production of *Henry V* set in occupied Iraq. Elsewhere, the Tricycle Theatre put on *Called to Account* about the internal wrangling at Westminster in the lead-up to the war, and the whole British political and media establishment was sent up in *Who's the Daddy*, a play set amid the sex scandals at the *Spectator* magazine, the beating heart of the UK establishment. Other productions such as *A Weapons Inspector Calls* and *Guantanamo* prove that satire is firmly back on the capital's theatrical agenda.

Satire aside, there's something for all tastes in London's theatreland, and even the revived West End juggles the serious with the frivolous. Recent productions attracting critical acclaim have included *Angels in America* at the Lyric Hammersmith, *Gaslight* at the Old Vic and the National's production of *Faust*. At the time of writing the musical causing the most excitement in town was *The Drowsy Chaperone* at the Novello Theatre, although a slew of superb musicals have raised the bar in recent years, from *Spamalot* and *Mary Poppins* to more left-field shows such as *Avenue Q* and *Wicked*.

Shakespeare's legacy is generously attended to on the city's stages, most notably by the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) and at the Globe Theatre. The RSC stages one or two of the bard's plays in London each year, although currently has no London home (its productions are based in Stratford-upon-Avon and usually transfer to the capital later on in the run), while the open-air Globe on the South Bank attempts to re-create the Elizabethan theatre experience. A faithful reconstruction of the original Globe, the building places audiences unusually close to the actors, and the management is quite happy to let them heckle each other. Since it opened in 1997 the Globe has enjoyed considerable success as a working theatre (as opposed to a mere curiosity). Artistic director Dominic Dromgoole, having taken over the reins at the start of 2006, plans to keep Shakespearean plays at the core of the theatre's programme and at the same time introduce a wider range of European and British classics.

Finally, if all this innovation and change is too much for you, drop by St Martin's Theatre where *The Mousetrap* has been running since 1952!

MUSIC

Modern music from the Kinks to Amy Winehouse is perhaps London's single greatest contribution to the world of arts, and after more than four decades at the top, it is still a creative hotbed and a magnet for bands and hopefuls from all over the world. Complementing the home-grown talent is the continuous influx of styles and cultures that keeps the music scene here so fresh.

For a list of venues, see [p306](#).

The Swinging '60s

London's prolific output began with the Kinks and their North London songwriter Ray Davies, whose lyrics read like a guide to the city. 'You Really Got Me', 'All Day and All of the Night' and 'Dedicated Follower of Fashion' brilliantly capture the anti-establishment mood of the '60s, while 'Waterloo Sunset' is the ultimate feel-good London song.

Another London band, the Rolling Stones, got their first paying gig at the old Bull & Bush in Richmond in 1963. Originally an R&B outfit, they went on to define rock and roll, and success and teen mayhem quickly followed. Their second single 'I Wanna Be Your Man' came to them via a chance encounter on the street with John Lennon and Paul McCartney, two blokes down from Liverpool recording in Abbey Rd and on their way to making their band, the Beatles, the biggest the world has ever known. The Stones, no slouches in the fame stakes themselves, released 'Not Fade Away' in 1964, and they're doggedly sticking to their word after 40 years of swaggering, swilling and swearing. The Beatles themselves, while of course famously being

from Liverpool, recorded most of their most famous songs in London and even performed their final concert on the roof of the Apple building in Mayfair.

Struggling to be heard above the din was inspirational mod band the Small Faces, formed in 1965 and remembered long afterwards. The Who, from West London, got attention by thrashing guitars on stage and chucking televisions out of hotel windows. The band is remembered also for rock operas and hanging around far too long flogging their back catalogue. Jimi Hendrix came to London and took guitar playing to levels not seen before or since, even tragically dying in a West London hotel under somewhat mysterious circumstances in 1970. In some ways, the swinging '60s ended in July 1969 when the Stones played a free concert in Hyde Park in front of more than a quarter of a million liberated fans.

The '70s

A local band called Tyrannosaurus Rex had enjoyed moderate success. In 1970 they changed their name to T Rex, frontman Marc Bolan donned a bit of glitter and the world's first 'glam' band had arrived. Glam encouraged the youth of uptight Britain to come out of the closet and be whatever they wanted to be. Brixton boy and self-proclaimed 'chameleon of pop' David Bowie began to steal the limelight, sealing his international fame with *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars* in 1972, one of the best albums of the decade. Roxy Music, incorporating art rock and synth pop, sang 'Love Is the Drug' in 1975.

Meanwhile, a little band called Led Zeppelin formed in London in 1968 and created the roots of heavy metal. Seventeen-year-old Farok Bulsara came to London from India (via Zanzibar) in the '60s and, in 1970, changed his name to Freddie Mercury; the consummate showman formed Queen with a few local lads and went on to become one of the greatest rock-and-roll stars of all time. Fleetwood Mac stormed the US as much as Britain; their *Rumours* became the fifth-highest-selling album in history (one behind Cambridge boys Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon*). Bob Marley recorded his *Live* album at the Lyceum Theatre in 1975.

While glam and rock opened the door for British youth, punk came along and kicked the bloody thing down, and set about turning the whole British establishment on its head. The Sex Pistols were the most outrageous of a wave of bands, including the Clash and the Damned, which started playing around London in 1976. The Pistols' first single was, appropriately enough, 'Anarchy in the UK'. 'God Save the Queen' and 'Pretty Vacant' followed and were brilliant. The album *Never Mind the Bollocks Here's the Sex Pistols* was released a year later to critical acclaim.

Fortunately, fellow Londoners the Clash had harnessed the raw anger of the time and worked it into a collar-grabbing brand of political protest that would see them outlast all of their peers. They trod the fine line between being pissed-off punks and great songwriters. The Clash were protesters who raged against racism, social injustice, police brutality and disenfranchisement. The disillusioned generation finally had a plan and a leader; *London Calling* is a spirited call to arms.

The Sex Pistols' ranting and raving John Lydon (formerly Johnny Rotten) became an embarrassment to a generation weaned on punk, but the dismayed reaction to the death of Clash frontman Joe Strummer in late 2002 showed that there was still lots to be proud of.

In 1977 the Jam, punk pioneers and mod revivalists, went on tour opening for the Clash (what days!). Lead singer and bristling live performer Paul Weller followed up with a hugely successful solo career.

top picks

A MUSICAL JOURNEY THROUGH LONDON

- **Zebra crossing on Abbey Road, St John's Wood** – the Beatles' most famous album cover
- **Heddon Street, Soho** – where the cover for *Ziggy Stardust* was photographed
- **23 Brook Street** – former home to composers Handel and Hendrix
- **St Martins College** – first Sex Pistols gig
- **Tree on Queen's Ride, Barnes** – where Marc Bolan died in his Mini in 1977
- **3 Savile Row** – site of the last Beatles performance on the roof of the Apple building in 1969

The '80s

Out of the ashes of punk came, God knows how, the New Wave and new romantics. Guitars were chucked away and replaced with keyboard synthesizers and drum machines. Fashion and image became as important as the music, and it's the seriousness with which the new romantics took themselves that gives the '80s such a bad rap. Overpriced, oversexed and way overdone, '80s London produced such unforgettables as Spandau Ballet, Culture Club, Bananarama, Wham! and Howard Jones' haircut. Wham!'s Georgios Panayiotou shaved his back, changed his name to George Michael and gained great success as a solo artist.

Depeche Mode broke new ground in neo-synth pop, while American London adoptee Chrissie Hynde formed the Pretenders and became the first bad-ass rock-and-roll chick; Northern-lads-turned-Londoners the Pet Shop Boys managed to avoid the '80s-pop path-to-oblivion, redeeming themselves with synth innovation and eventually symphonic spectacle as they performed their own score to Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* on Trafalgar Sq alongside the Dresdner Sinfoniker in September 2004. Neneh Cherry started rapping, and Madness came up with a winning ska-pop combo and featured London in many of their hits and video clips.

But it was all to no avail, because blonde boy-band Bros emerged from South London to top the charts and confirm that the local music scene was really in deep shit. Relief was already coming from up north with the Smiths, and at the end of the decade the Stone Roses and the Happy Mondays broke through with a new sound that had grown out of the recent acid-house raves, with jangly guitars, psychedelic twists and a beat you just couldn't resist. Dance exploded onto the scene, with dilated pupils and Chupa Chups, in 1988's summer of love. A generation was gripped by dance music and a new lexicon had to be learned: techno, electronica, hip-hop, garage, House, trance and so on. Although the E generation that launched the rave/dance culture has grown up and the scene is, well, stagnant at best, London still ranks among the best club cities in the world (see p298).

Britpop

The early 1990s saw the explosion of yet another scene: Britpop, a genre broadly defined as back to (Beatles) basics, familiar old-fashioned three chords and all that jazz, with loads of slang and in-references which, frankly, made it so 'British'. There was a very public battle between two of the biggest bands, Blur from London and Oasis from Manchester, and the public loved the tit-for-tat between the cocky geezers from the capital and the swaggering, belligerent Mancs. When it came down to the line and both bands released a single on the same day, Blur overcame the northerners and got the number one slot; Blur bassist Alex James wore an Oasis T-shirt on *Top of the Pops* in a moment of utter brilliance to be remembered by a generation.

Also weighing in for the London side were the brilliant and erratic Suede (who finally disbanded in 2003) and Elastica (who disbanded in 2001), fronted by the punky, poppy Justine Frischmann, not to mention Sheffield defectors to the capital, Jarvis Cocker's Pulp.

Skirting around the edges, doing their own thing without the hullabaloo, were Radiohead (from Oxford, close enough to London), in our opinion one of the best groups of the era. As the Britpop bands and fans became more sophisticated, the genre died around 1997. Groups such as Coldplay enjoyed massive commercial and critical success, but the zeitgeist had well and truly disappeared around the start of the new millennium leaving London's music scene looking washed up and unexciting.

21st-Century Music

At the beginning of the 21st century multicultural London pushed things forward, to bend the words of Mike Skinner (aka the Streets), whose debut album, *Original Pirate Material*, took London by storm in 2002 and whose follow-up *A Grand Don't Come For Free* has seen equal success, with everyday tales from the life of a modern lad. It's a genre-straddling classic from a young white rapper originally from Birmingham and now living in Brixton, a cross-cultural gem that lights the way for London's music scene in the 21st century.

London's Asian community has also made a big splash in recent years, with Talvin Singh and Nitin Sawhney fusing dance with traditional Indian music to stunning effect, and Asian Dub Foundation bringing their unique brand of jungle techno and political comment to an ever-widening audience, despite being dropped by the major British record labels.

top picks

LONDON ALBUMS

- *Abbey Road* – The Beatles
- *Exile on Main Street* – The Rolling Stones
- *The Good The Bad and The Queen* – Damon Albarn et al
- *London Calling* – The Clash
- *Modern Life Is Rubbish* – Blur
- *Alright, Still* – Lily Allen
- *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars* – David Bowie
- *Silent Alarm* – Bloc Party
- *Something Else* – The Kinks
- *Sound Affects* – The Jam

London Music Today

Parallel to the re-explosion of interest in punk rock has been London's exceptional electro scene, which continues to fulminate and produce amazing music today, despite many observers predicting it would be a flash in the pan. This has greatly influenced nu-wave, the best-known exponents of which are the Klaxons.

The London scene has fought its way back from being an overhyped late-'90s destination for those seeking cool by association and is again one of the major creative musical hubs on earth. Whether it's home-grown capital talent or refugees from the provinces seeking fame and fortune, London's music scene is throwing up plenty of exciting and ground-breaking music.

The toast of 2006 was Southgate's Amy Winehouse with her dazzling second album *Back to Black* charting at number 1 in the UK album charts and her antics on and off stage making her a cult figure almost overnight. West London's Lily Allen similarly broke through in the same year with her whimsical London songs – *Smile* and *LDN* became anthems in 2006 – and since then the two stars have been hyped side by side and pitted against each other for awards. Lesser known but equally exciting performers such as Jamie T and Just Jack both give a fantastically original slant on London life.

Grime and its successor dubstep, two real indigenous London musical forms born in the East End out of a fusion of hip-hop and Asian influences, are currently at the cutting edge of London music. Dizzee Rascal, Lady Sovereign, Lethal Bizzle and Roll Deep are perhaps the best-known singers and groups working in the genre – for a true East End night out track them down playing a local gig while you're in town.

VISUAL ARTS

London has attracted many of the greatest artists in the world from Monet to Van Gogh, even if Britain's contribution to the visual arts has historically not measured up to that of its European neighbours. Today, London is the art capital of Europe, with an exciting gallery scene and some of the world's best modern art collections.

Holbein to Turner

It wasn't until the rule of the Tudors that art took off in London at all. The German Hans Holbein the Younger (1497–1543) was court painter to Henry VIII, and one of his finest works, *The Ambassadors* (1533), hangs in the National Gallery (p75). A batch of great portrait artists worked at court during the 17th century. Best of them was Anthony Van Dyck (1599–1641), a Belgian who spent the last nine years of his life in London and painted some hauntingly beautiful portraits of Charles I, including *Charles I on Horseback* (1638), now in the National

Pete Doherty and Carl Barat single-handedly renewed interest in guitar music following its post-Britpop malaise. The Libertines, formed in a Stoke Newington flat, created a huge splash with their 2002 debut single *What a Waster*, which made it into the top 40 despite no mainstream radio play, and their first album went platinum. However, despite such huge success, the duo split up after Doherty broke into Barat's Marylebone flat to steal money for heroin. Kicked out, Doherty has gone on to form Babyshambles, who have also enjoyed some success, although they're arguably much better known for Doherty's never-dull private life and his problems with heroin addiction.

Other London talents that have come to the fore in the past few years include art rockers Bloc Party, South London maestros Athlete and punkers the Paddingtons.

Gallery. Charles I was a keen collector and it was during his reign that the Raphael Cartoons, now in the Victoria & Albert Museum (p139), came to London.

Local artists began to emerge in the 18th century. Thomas Gainsborough (1727–88) extended portraiture to include the genre and is regarded as the first great British landscapist, even though most of his landscapes are actually backgrounds. William Hogarth (1697–1764), by contrast, is best known for his moralising serial prints of London lowlife (see the boxed text, p23).

England has a fine tradition of watercolourists, beginning with the poet and engraver William Blake (1757–1827), some of whose romantic paintings and illustrations (he illustrated Milton's *Paradise Lost*, for example) hang in the Tate Britain (p103). John Constable (1776–1837) was a much more skilful and important visual artist than Blake. He studied the clouds and skies above Hampstead Heath, sketching hundreds of scenes that he'd later match with subjects in his landscapes.

JMW Turner (1775–1851), equally at home with oils and watercolours, represented the pinnacle of 19th-century British art. Through innovative use of colour and gradations of light he created a new atmosphere that seemed to capture the wonder, sublimity and terror of nature. His later works – including *Snow Storm – Steam-boat off a Harbour's Mouth* (1842), *Peace – Burial at Sea* (1842) and *Rain, Steam, Speed* (1844), now in the Tate Britain and the National Gallery – were increasingly abstract, and although widely vilified at the time, later inspired the likes of Claude Monet.

The Pre-Raphaelites to Hockney

The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood (1848–54), founded in London, burst briefly onto the scene. Taking their inspiration from the works of the Romantic poets, they ditched the pastel-coloured rusticity of the day in favour of big, bright and bold depictions of medieval legends and female beauty.

Two of Britain's leading 20th-century painters emerged next. In 1945 the tortured, Irish-born painter Francis Bacon (1909–92) caused a stir when he exhibited his *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion* – now on display at the Tate Britain – and afterwards carried on unsettling the world with his distorted, repulsive and fascinating forms. The chaos in Bacon's studio was almost as legendary as his Picasso-meets-Velázquez-meets-Van Gogh-meets-Scarfe paintings. He famously worked knee-deep in scraps of paper, paint rags, newspaper cuttings and other general litter. As he was largely homosexual, it was considered a rare find in the art world when a painting of one of his female lovers went on sale in 2004, and he was also in the news when a forgotten triptych of his was found in an Iranian gallery.

Australian art critic Robert Hughes has described Bacon's contemporary Lucian Freud (b 1922) as 'the greatest living realist painter', although Young British Artist Tracey Emin was less than impressed with his recent portrait of her friend, supermodel Kate Moss. From the 1950s the bohemian Freud has concentrated on pale, muted portraits – often nudes, and frequently of friends and family, although he has also painted the Queen. Twice married and rumoured to have up to 40 illegitimate children, Freud's recent self-portrait *The Painter Is Surprised by a Naked Admirer* fuelled a press frenzy, as journalists tried to guess the identity of the naked woman clinging to his leg.

After the initial shock of Bacon and Freud during the 1940s and '50s, pop art perfectly encapsulated the image of London in the swinging '60s. The brilliant David Hockney (b 1937) gained a reputation as one of the leading pop artists through his early use of magazine-style images (although he rejected the label). After a move to California, his work became increasingly naturalistic as he took inspiration from the sea, the sun, swimmers and swimming pools. Two of his most famous works, *Mr and Mrs Clark and Percy* (1971) and *A Bigger Splash* (1974), are displayed at the Tate Britain.

The Origins of Britart

Gilbert and George were the quintessential English conceptual artists of the 1960s. They, at the very least, paved the way for the shock and celebrity of Britart and were the art as much as the work itself. Despite their long careers, they are still at the heart of the British art world and represented Britain at the 2005 Venice Biennale, and had a very successful retrospective at the Tate Modern in 2007.

LOCAL VOICES: HILARY ROSEN *Interviewed by Steve Fallon*

Hilary Rosen (www.hilaryrosen.co.uk) is an award-winning water-colourist who resides in Muswell Hill N10 and has exhibited at the Royal Academy, the Barbican and, most recently, the National Theatre.

London gal born and bred? I was born within the sound of the Bow bells – well, sort of because they hadn't yet been repaired after the war. I grew up in Maida Vale and then moved to Muswell Hill, so I've gone from valley to hill.

Earliest memory? My grandmother lived in Cable St in the East End, where there was still a lot of war damage. I remember rubble with wallpaper stuck to it. They tell me we used to paddle in the Thames in those days. Certainly London is a major influence on my work.

You paint bridges a lot. Why's that? I started to get interested in architecture and that evolved into bridges. Bridges lead from one thing to another – they represent transition. If you think about it, bridges are a metaphor for moving from one part of life to another. Chelsea, Vauxhall, Battersea bridges... I love them all.

Does the great outdoors do it for you? Do you paint en plein–air in London? I hate open spaces. I'm terrified by empty space. London's parks have two edges for me – very green and very sinister with people lurking about.

Here for the duration? A friend from South Africa recently commented that London is a young city. I disagree. I'll enjoy living in London till I die.

Britart? What's your take? I follow what's going on and it's wonderful to see other work. It's all quite interesting but a bit like surrealism. They can do their thing and I'll do mine.

Producing, exhibiting, selling – which comes first? Exhibiting, for sure. It's really important for me to have something on show. It must be the theatrical side of me. My grandmother was a dancer at the interval in cinemas.

The general populace, art and culture... Is it getting better, worse or staying just the same? It's all so much better. Culture is much more accessible now and the audience is much more diverse. It's marvellous that museums are free. I detest a rarefied view of art.

On my perfect day, find me... Drawing and sketching by the Thames. Then I might walk up to Old Compton St in Soho and have a salad at Amato (p240). I might draw on the Soho streets but it attracts too much of an audience. I really can't work while being observed.

I'll always come back to London for... The Thames. Especially at night. And the tube. People think I'm mad but I adore it; it's very London. There's such a mix of people. I was incandescent when the bombs went off. I thought how dare these people do this to my city?

Despite its incredibly rich collections, Britain had never led, dominated or even really participated in a particular epoch or style. That all changed in the twilight of the 20th century, when Britart burst onto the scene with its sliced cows, elephant dung and piles of bricks. It's questionable whether the movement will leave a lasting impression, but one thing's for sure: during the 1990s London was the beating heart of the art world.

Britart sprang from a show called Freeze that was staged in a Docklands warehouse in 1988. It was organised by showman Damien Hirst and largely featured his fellow graduates from Goldsmiths College. Influenced by pop culture and punk, this loose movement was soon catapulted to notoriety by the advertising guru Charles Saatchi, who came to dominate the scene like a puppeteer. Indeed, you could almost say he created the genre with his free spending and commissioning. From 1992 Saatchi held a series of seven exhibitions entitled Young British Artists (YBAs), which burst onto the national stage with 1997's epoch-making Sensation exhibition at the Royal Academy.

The work was brash, decadent, ironic, easy to grasp and eminently marketable. To shock seemed the impulse, and the artists did just that. Hirst chipped in with a cow sliced into sections and preserved in formaldehyde; flies buzzed around another cow's head and were zapped in his early work. *A Thousand Years*. Chris Ofili provoked with the *Holy Virgin Mary*, a black Madonna made partly with elephant poo; the Chapman brothers produced mannequins of children with genitalia on their heads; and Marcus Harvey created a portrait of notorious child-killer Myra Hindley, made entirely with children's hand-prints.

The areas of Shoreditch, Hoxton and Whitechapel – where many artists lived, worked and hung out – became the epicentre of the movement and a rash of galleries moved in. Among these was White Cube, owned by one of the most important patrons of early Britart, Jay Jopling.

The exhibitions sent shockwaves around the world, as sections of society took turns to be outraged. Liberals were drawn into defending the works, the media went positively gaga promoting some of the artists like pop stars and Britart became the talk of the world. For the

10 years or so that it rode the wave of this publicity, its defining characteristics were celebrity and shock value. Damien Hirst and Tracey Emin became the inevitable celebrities – people the media knew they could sell to the mainstream.

One critic said the hugely hyped movement was the product of a 'cultural vacuum' and had become like the emperor's new clothes, which everyone was afraid to criticise for fear they'd look stupid. 'Cold, mechanical, conceptual bullshit', was how the culture minister described the nominations for the Turner Prize one year. Hirst finally admitted in 2005 that some of his own work irritated even him.

After Britart

Tracey Emin (b 1963) went on to become the most famous artist-behaving-badly. She was short-listed for the Turner Prize with an installation, *My Bed*, her unmade messy bed, strewn with blood-stained underwear and used condoms. For another installation, *Everyone I Have Ever Slept with 1963–1995*, she sewed the names of all the relevant people on a tent. She was perfect for Britart because she pandered to the public's darkest levels of voyeurism and their love of celebrity. When her cat went missing, people tore down the notices she put up and kept them as *objets d'art*.

But while the world was focusing on the stars, there were a lot of great artists hammering away on the fringes. A highlight of the era has to be Richard Wilson's iconic installation, *20:50* (1987). It's a room filled waist high with recycled oil, where you walk in and feel you've just been shot out into space. In his most famous work, *24 Hour Psycho*, Scottish video artist Douglas Gordon slowed Alfred Hitchcock's masterpiece down so much it was stripped of its narrative and viewed more like a moving sculpture, while Gary Hume quietly went about his work, the less-fashionable painting. Hume first came to prominence with his *Doors* series of full-size paintings of hospital doors, powerful allegorical descriptions of despair – or just perfect reproductions of doors.

Rachel Whiteread won the Turner Prize in 1993 for *House*, a concrete cast of an East End terrace dwelling that the council controversially knocked down shortly afterwards. In the same week she won £40,000 in the doubly lucrative prize for Worst British Artist of the year, an award set up by former disco funsters KLF, who out-shocked the Britartists by burning £1 million in cash in front of assembled journalists.

The biggest date on the current calendar is now the Turner Prize at the Tate Britain, won in recent years by Grayson Perry, a transvestite potter, and Jeremy Deller, a video artist who freely admits to not being able to draw.

The biggest-name British artists working today are Banksy, the anonymous street artist whose work has even made it to the Hollywood elite with his 2006 *Barely Legal* show in Los Angeles, and sculptor Anthony Gormley (who recently decorated the South Bank with his unmistakable 2.7m-high human sculptures based on himself) but who is best known for the 22m-high *Angel of the North*, beside the A1 trunk road near Gateshead in northern England.

Even Emin has gone from *enfant terrible* of the scene to pillar of the art establishment. In 2007 she was made a Royal Academician, admitting her to the true elite of British art and allowing her to exhibit six pieces at the annual Summer Exhibition. As if this wasn't enough to confirm her position, in the same year she also represented Britain at the Venice Biennale, only the second lone female ever to have done so.

CINEMA & TELEVISION

Television was born in London and is ageing well. Although locals complain about the constant dumbing down of the BBC and ever-falling standards as producers chase an ever lower common denominator, most countries would give their eye teeth to have television like that available here, from the extraordinary BBC natural history unit films to the cutting-edge comedy and drama across the channels. However, although the UK punches well above its weight in terms of presence on the international film scene, London is far from the centre of the film industry that it might be.

London on Film

Londoners are proud of their city, but few claim the city to be at the forefront of the film industry, with British film in general being massively hit and miss. Certainly, there have been some individual commercial triumphs, including recent Oscar-winner *The Queen* and the newly ripped and metrosexual James Bond sporting tight Speedos in *Casino Royale*, not to mention '90s smash hits such as *Four Weddings and a Funeral* and *Shakespeare in Love*. But there's an underlying frustration that the local film industry is not as strong as it should be, especially given the disproportionate influence of the Brits in Hollywood.

However, London is one of the most popular places to make films in the world. Recent converts have included that most die-hard of New Yorkers, Woody Allen, who has made *Match Point*, *Scoop* and *Cassandra's Dream* in the capital over the past few years. Other recent blockbusters shot here include *Basic Instinct 2*, *The Da Vinci Code* and *Batman Begins*.

Naturally, the eponymous West London neighbourhood pops up in 1999's *Notting Hill*, the Dickensian back streets of Borough feature in such polar opposites as chick-flick *Bridget Jones's Diary* and Guy Ritchie's gangster romp *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels*, while Smithfield is given a certain bleak glamour in *Closer*.

The city's combination of historic and ultramodern architecture certainly works to its advantage in this respect. Ang Lee's *Sense and Sensibility*, for example, could retreat to historic Greenwich for its wonderful parkland and neoclassical architecture. Inigo Jones' Queen's House, in particular, features in interior scenes. Merchant Ivory's costume drama *Howard's End* and the biopic *Chaplin* feature the neo-Gothic St Pancras Chambers, while the early 1980s film, *The Elephant Man*, took advantage of the moody atmosphere around the then-undeveloped Shad Thames (the site of today's Butler's Wharf).

There are some films that Londoners find heart-warming just because they feature ordinary shots of the contemporary city. *Sliding Doors* is quite fun to watch for the shots of the Underground, West London and Primrose Hill. Similarly, 2002's *28 Days Later* has amazing opening scenes of central London and Docklands lying abandoned after a monkey virus wipes out the population. Popcorn blockbuster *Mission: Impossible* features Liverpool St station, and John Landis' irrepressibly entertaining *An American Werewolf in London* finishes with a mad chase in Piccadilly Circus.

Fans often nostalgically refer back to the golden – but honestly rather brief – era of Ealing comedies, when the London-based Ealing Studios turned out a steady stream of hits. Between 1947 and 1955, when the studios were sold to the BBC, they produced enduring classics such as *Passport to Pimlico*, *Kind Hearts and Coronets*, *Whisky Galore*, *The Man in the White Suit*, *The Lavender Hill Mob* and *The Ladykillers*. This was also the time of legendary filmmakers Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, the men behind *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp* and *The Red Shoes*.

Today, such halcyon days seem far distant, as the industry is stuck in a rut of romantic comedies (see Richard Curtis' horribly saccharine *Love Actually*), costume dramas (the usual adaptations of classic novels starring Helena Bonham Carter in a corset) and increasingly dire gangster pics. Producers, directors and actors complain about a lack of adventurousness in those who hold the purse strings, while film investors claim there are not enough scripts worth backing.

A system of public funding through the UK Film Council exists alongside private investment, and although in 2002 it only accounted for a minority of the £570 million spent on film in the UK, some critics object to the scheme. The *Evening Standard's* late, lamented former film critic Alexander Walker was one of those who suggested that it led to poor projects being made, simply because the money was there.

Meanwhile, well-known British actors such as Ewan McGregor, Ian McKellen, Ralph Fiennes, Jude Law, Liam Neeson, Hugh Grant, Rhys Ifans, Kristen Scott Thomas and Emily Watson spend time working abroad, as do many British directors, such as Tony Scott (*Top Gun*, *True Romance*), Ridley Scott (*Bladerunner*, *Alien*, *Thelma & Louise*, *Gladiator*), Anthony Minghella (*The English Patient*, *Cold Mountain*), Michael Winterbottom (*The Claim*) and Sam Mendes (*American Beauty*, *The Road to Perdition*).

Television

London is the home of TV; it was born and bred here, with John Logie Baird first demonstrating it in Soho to a select group of scientists, and then to the public a few years later. Perhaps more significantly, the world's first public broadcaster, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), began here too and has originated some of the world's most recognised TV formats and personalities.

When it comes to televisual output, London plays with a somewhat stronger hand than in film: a huge amount of global TV content originates in Britain, from *Planet Earth* to *Who Wants to be a Millionaire*. There are five free-to-air national TV stations: BBC1, BBC2 (established 1964), ITV1 (1955), Channel 4 (1982) and Five (1997). Even though cable is now available and digital services were introduced in 1998, the BBC derives funding from a system of TV licences paid for by viewers. Ever since the BBC began broadcasts in 1932 (regularly from 1936), there's been a public service ethic driving British TV. John Reith, the first director-general of the BBC, took quite a paternalistic view of the audience, seeing the role of TV as to inform and educate as much as to entertain, and insisted on quality. There's still a hangover of all this today, although recent years have seen the BBC chase ratings to an extent that many thought was plainly embarrassing, supporting populist, prime-time rubbish over more Reithean pursuits such as documentaries, news and political debate.

A complete history of English TV is obviously not possible here, but anyone familiar with the subject will be aware of an enormously long roll call of classic series, from comedies such as *Fawlty Towers* and *Rising Damp* and cop shows such as *The Sweeney* and *The Professionals* to cult series such as *The Prisoner*, *The Avengers* and *Minder*; from 1970s comedies (*The Good Life*) to heritage offerings in the 1980s (*Brideshead Revisited*); from thrillers (*Edge of Darkness*) to dramas (*The Singing Detective*) – the list could go on endlessly. However, undoubtedly, the two most famous TV serials associated with London itself are the long-running soap opera *EastEnders* and the police drama *The Bill*. Ironically, the first of these is actually filmed at the BBC studios in Elstree, Hertfordshire, although Albert Sq is said to be modelled on Fasset Sq in Dalston. *The Bill* is shot around the East End.

In recent years Britain, like elsewhere, has been in the grip of reality-TV fever. *Big Brother* and *Celebrity Big Brother* have made a huge splash, while wannabe pop stars were given the chance to be discovered and moulded in *Pop Idol*, spawning the now huge star Will Young and a few more forgettable sidekicks. Even more popular has been ITV's *I'm a Celebrity Get Me Out of Here!*, where D-list stars annually undergo humiliating and disgusting bush-tucker trials in order to win food in the Australian bush.

Comedy has always been something that Britain does particularly well, with Slough-set *The Office* and, um, Britain-set *Little Britain* now worldwide phenomena spawning US remakes. Two utter comic gems far more directly associated with London are *Nathan Barley*, the Chris Morris-penned much-needed comedic response to the Shoreditch scene and the wonderfully spot-on political satire *The Thick of It*, a fictional behind-the-scenes look at life in the Westminster village in the age of spin.

DANCE

Whether you're into contemporary, classical or crossover, London has the right moves for you. Recently in the throes of renewed *Billy Elliot* fever, thanks to the new musical, the city's up there with New York and Paris as one of the world's great dance capitals and has been the crucible of one of the most significant developments in modern choreographic history. Although it's been more than a decade since classical ballet was mixed with old-fashioned musical and contemporary dance in Matthew Bourne's all-male *Swan Lake*, that piece is seen as a watershed that catapulted dance from the back of the arts pages into the popular global mainstream.

Even today, Bourne's *Swan Lake* still tours the world, while the man himself produces newer pieces, from the Scottish-influenced *Highland Fling* to *The Car Man* (a *West Side Story*-style reworking of Bizet's *Carmen*). Having presented his own take on Tchaikovsky in *Nutcracker!*, Bourne crossed over into theatre in 2004, with his superlative *Play Without Words*, a two-part drama told solely through graceful movement. (He has also worked as a choreographer for the West End musical *Mary Poppins*.)

Other leading London-based talents have helped take the dance message to the wider world, with Rafael Bonachela scripting Kylie Minogue's Showgirl tour, and Wayne McGregor working on the latest Harry Potter film.

However, it's not just Bourne, Bonachela and McGregor in the vanguard. The Place (p313), in Euston, was where contemporary dance emerged in London in the 1960s, and it's recently been joined by Laban (p313) as a place to catch cutting-edge performances. Meanwhile, the revamped Sadler's Wells (p314) – the birthplace of English classical ballet in the 19th century – continues to stage an exciting programme of various styles from leading national ballets and international troupes, such as Pina Bausch, Twyla Tharp, Dance Theatre of Harlem and Alvin Ailey.

At Covent Garden's Royal Opera House (p316) principal ballerina Darcy Bussell bid goodbye to her adoring public in 2007 as she retired from the house's most prestigious position aged just 38. Going out at the height of her powers (her appearance in George Balanchine's *Apollo* the same year was considered by many to be her finest achievement to date) proved another canny move by the most famous English dancer since Margot Fonteyn; unlike Dame Margot, she will be remembered at her peak rather than for her long decline.

Despite a slight flirtation with newly commissioned pieces, including one with a Jimi Hendrix soundtrack, the capital's leading classical-dance troupe, the Royal Ballet, has largely been sticking to the traditional. Several back-to-back anniversaries have meant retrospectives devoted to choreographers Balanchine and Frederick Ashton, as well as to dancers Sergei Diaghilev and Dame Ninette de Valois (the latter was the ballet's founder). All the same, the Royal Ballet has made itself more accessible during this period by dropping some ticket prices to £10 (as at the National Theatre).

One troupe always worth keeping an eye out for is the innovative Rambert Dance Company. Another is that of former Royal Ballet dancers Michael Nunn and William Levitt. Having made their name, via a Channel 4 TV documentary, as the Ballet Boyz, and then the George Piper Dances, they have most recently teamed up with London-based French superstar Sylvie Guillem to perform works by acclaimed modern choreographer Russell Maliphant. Guillem, still a principal guest artist at the Royal Ballet, also reached out to London's strong South Asian dance tradition when she teamed up with contemporary choreographer and Kathak dance specialist Akram Khan.

The main London dance festival is [Dance Umbrella](#) (☎ 8741 5881; www.danceumbrella.co.uk). Running for six weeks from late September, it's one of the world's leading dance festivals of its kind. Otherwise, for the latest on what's on, check www.londondance.com. For more information on specific venues and companies, see p313.

ENVIRONMENT & PLANNING THE LAND

Greater London comprises 1572 sq km enclosed by the M25 ring road. As well as being essential to the trade upon which London was built, the River Thames divides the city into north and south, a partition that had much more than geographical implications. The Romans designated the southern bank as a seedy London of gaming and debauchery, and for almost two millennia since, respectable and cultured folk settled on the northern side while the outcasts lived in the insalubrious south. The potential of the South Bank has only been realised in the last decade.

Although London grew from the area known as the City, it doesn't have a single focal point. Its expansion was never really planned; rather, the burgeoning city just consumed outlying settlements. Thus – as any reader of Dickens will appreciate – London today is more a patchwork of villages than a single city. Although the city can feel like a never-ending concrete jungle, there are actually huge swathes of green on its outskirts – take Richmond Park and Hampstead Heath, for example – and large parks such as Regent's and Hyde in the centre.

GREEN LONDON

The most serious environmental problem facing the centre of London, the pollution and chronic congestion caused by heavy traffic, has been partially alleviated since 2003 when the Mayor's Congestion Tax was introduced, whereby every car entering the centre had to pay £5 (now £8) for the privilege. Ken Livingstone has proven his commitment to helping the environment again and again, from introducing buses running on hydrogen fuel cells (admittedly only in their

trial stages) and introducing a Lower Emissions Zone from February 2008 that sees additional charges being levied on heavy-polluting vehicles entering Greater London.

Local councils have also stepped up their efforts to be green, with Richmond council being the first to introduce higher parking fees for 'gas-guzzlers' and Hackney being the first council to introduce compulsory recycling in 2007. Recycling has been available in London for many years but mainly in the form of community bins rather than separate household ones, and the mainstream hasn't really been encouraged to go green. Attitudes have changed recently and most people are doing their bit, but on the whole the UK has a pitiful record in this respect.

To look at the Thames' murky waters, you'd assume it was another pollution black spot, but below the surface, its health has improved dramatically in recent years and the river is playing an increasingly important role in recreation. By 1962 the combined impact of untreated sewage and industrial pollution had killed off virtually every sign of life in the river, but thanks to a massive clean-up it's now home to some 115 species of fish, including shad, sea lamprey and even salmon (for which special ladders have been built over the weirs). With them have come 10,000 herons, cormorants and other waterfowl that feed on the fish; even otters have been spotted on the river's upper reaches.

London boasts more parks and open spaces than any city of its size in the world – from the neatly manicured (Holland Park, St James's Park) to the semiwild (Richmond Park, Bushy Park). Between them they provide suitable habitats for a wide range of animals and birds.

The mammal you're most likely to spot on land is the grey squirrel, a North American import that has colonised every big park and decimated the indigenous red squirrel population. Hedgehogs also live here, though their numbers are dwindling, perhaps due to the increased use of slug pellets. Outside the very centre of town you're quite likely to see foxes if you go for a stroll after dark – their numbers are massively on the rise and most people either love or hate them. Richmond Park hosts badgers as well as herds of red and fallow deer. The oddest mammal yet was spotted in the capital in 2006 when a lost bottlenose whale swam up the Thames through central London. Sadly, the whale died after a long attempt to rescue her and release her back into the North Sea, and her skeleton can now be seen in the Natural History Museum (p141).

Bird-watchers, especially those keen on waterfowl, will love London. There are ducks, pelicans and the Queen's swans in St James's Park, and more ducks and beautiful, chestnut-headed great-crested grebes in Hyde Park's Serpentine. London canals are also happy hunting grounds for spotting waterfowl.

Garden birds, such as long-tailed and great tits, sparrows, robins and blackbirds, roost in all the parks, but some parks attract more interesting migrants. In Holland Park in spring you might glimpse flocks of tiny goldcrests. Kestrels nest around the Tower of London, as do the better-known ravens. The open stretches of the commons in Barnes and Wimbledon also harbour a rich assortment of birds and mammals.

Most unusual of all, brightly coloured parrots and parakeets can be seen living wild around Richmond, Kew and many other parts of Southwest London along the Thames – their origins are still debated, but they have been multiplying in recent years and seem to be able to survive in London thanks to global warming.

The [London Wildlife Trust](#) (LWT; ☎ 7261 0447; www.wildlondon.org.uk) maintains more than 50 nature reserves in the city, which offer the chance to see a range of birds and occasionally small mammals. Battersea Park Nature Reserve has several nature trails, while the Trent Country Park even boasts a Braille trail through the woodlands. Parts of Hampstead Heath have been designated a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) for their wealth of natural history.

Green fingers won't want to miss the exotic plants in the exceedingly lovely Kew Gardens (p209), while London's parks boast a variety of common or garden trees, shrubs and flowers. Many Londoners also take pride in their private gardens, which range from handkerchief-sized back yards to sprawling mini-estates, some of which open for a few days each summer through the [National Gardens Scheme](#) (NGS; ☎ 01483-211535; www.ngs.org.uk; Hatchlands Park, East Clandon, Guildford GU4 7RT). Admission usually costs £2, which goes to charity.

URBAN PLANNING & DEVELOPMENT

Central London has been considerably smartened up in recent years, and mayor Ken Livingstone is at the forefront of other bold and imaginative schemes to make the city a more pleasant

place to live and visit. Olympic Games development in East London is currently seeing the concentration of efforts, and the communities living in pockets of the Lea River Valley have succumbed to the inevitable and been moved on (the area included several large Roma camps that have been there for decades).

The biggest challenge facing London is how to house its growing population without encroaching on the green belt surrounding the city. Previously run-down central areas such as Hoxton and Clerkenwell were dolled up in the 1990s with young populations moving in and converting warehouses. The repopulation of Docklands continues, but London is quickly running out of space. The mayor has taken measures to address the problem and in his London Plan he has also built in the protection of green space, although business interests are mobilising to scrap that protection and reduce the 'burden' on developers.

In what is perhaps a sign of things to come, the government is facing an inevitable conflict with environmentalists over the proposed regeneration of the Thames Gateway, the 60km on each side of the Thames from East London to the North Sea. The plan is to build 200,000 homes and provide 300,000 jobs but in an area that contains some of Britain's most valuable wildlife sites and a 25km stretch of shore that is designated as an EU high-priority special protection area.

GOVERNMENT & POLITICS

LOCAL GOVERNMENT

When 12th-century King Richard the Lionheart gave London the right to self-government in exchange for a little pocket money, supporters cheered 'Londoners shall have no king but their mayor'. That's still true for the City of London today, but Greater London, where the vast majority of the population lives and works, has had a trickier time of it.

Some form of the GLC was going about its business quietly for a few centuries, looking after local interests and acquiescently toeing the national government's line. That all changed when Labour man Ken Livingstone took over as boss of the council in the early 1980s, when Margaret Thatcher was prime minister. These two couldn't have been more different and a clash was inevitable. Livingstone campaigned for cheaper public transport in the capital and generally became a thorn in Thatcher's side. She got so fed up with him that in 1986 she abolished the GLC altogether, and London became the only major capital in the world without a self-governing authority. Fourteen years later the Labour government brought back a new version, the Greater London Assembly (GLA), and arranged elections for London's first-ever popularly elected mayor in 2000 (see boxed text, [opposite](#)).

The 25-member GLA has limited authority over transport, economic development, strategic planning, the environment, the police, fire brigades, civil defence and cultural matters. It is elected from GLA constituencies and by London as a whole. It is not a conventional opposition, but can reject the mayor's budget, form special investigation committees and hold the mayor to

DEATH AT HIGH TEA

London is no stranger to the grotesque – from the stabbing of Bulgarian dissident Georgi Markov on Waterloo Bridge in 1978 by a KGB agent using a poisoned umbrella to the 1982 hanging of the 'Pope's Banker' Roberto Calvi from underneath Blackfriars Bridge. However, in late 2006 the death of an almost unheard-of Russian dissident from radiation poisoning in London shocked the nation. Alexander Litvinenko was a mid-ranking officer in Russia's Federal Security Bureau (FSB) until having to flee the country in 2000 following a prison sentence for revealing the crimes of his FSB superiors. With close links to exiled Russian oligarch Boris Berezovsky, another Russian Londoner in exile, Litvinenko became a British citizen just weeks before his fateful meeting with FSB officers at the Millennium Hotel on Grosvenor Sq, Mayfair. Here, it's alleged, his tea was poisoned with a rare radioactive isotope, Polonium 210, which killed him within weeks.

Litvinenko's murder resulted in abnormally high radioactivity levels being detected throughout London and even on two British Airways planes flying the London–Moscow route. These were traced to Andrei Lugovoi, an FSB operative who now stands accused of killing Litvinenko. The British government formally requested the extradition of Andrei Lugovoi in 2007, and when it was rejected by the Russian government there followed a spate of tit-for-tat diplomacy not seen between the UK and Russia since the days of the Cold War.

RED KEN

London's first-ever popularly elected mayor is a colourful, charismatic character who has done much to improve London for tourists. As the leader of the Greater London Council (GLC) during the 1980s, 'Red Ken' – as the socialist was once popularly known – went head to head with that most conservative of prime ministers, Margaret Thatcher. He pushed a huge 'Fare's Fair' campaign to reduce the cost of public transport in London, and put a giant counter on the roof of County Hall, which gave updated unemployment figures and was clearly visible from the House of Commons. Thatcher became so infuriated with Livingstone that she scrapped the GLC altogether.

He entered Parliament as an MP and proposed many policies that seemed radical at the time, but which have since been adopted as government policy. His refusal to always toe the party line made him popular with Londoners but earned him the mistrust of the parliamentary Labour Party. He was a hate figure for the right-wing tabloids, and the *Sun* once called him 'the most odious man in Britain', and portrayed him as a freak for his love of newts (Ken's big hobby).

When Labour decided to reinstate the London council as the Greater London Assembly (GLA), popular Livingstone seemed a shoe-in for the job of mayor. However, Tony Blair was determined to halt Livingstone's election bandwagon and, shamelessly rigging the selection process against Livingstone, the Labour Party's nomination went to a Blair loyalist. Crash, bang, wallop... Livingstone resigned from the party and ran as an independent candidate, promising to lock horns with the central government whenever it came to London's best interest. He swept to victory on a tide of popular support in May 2000. Undermining Londoners' fierce independence was perhaps Tony Blair's single biggest mistake in his first term in power.

In eight years of power Ken has made transport his number-one priority, fighting tooth and nail against the government-proposed, part-privatisation of the Underground (and failing), improving bus services and introducing the bold, risky yet hugely successful congestion charge in 2003. His most important strategy is the £100 billion London Plan, a planning framework for the city over the next decade, which aims to overhaul London's use of resources and its relationship with the environment. One of its toughest and most contentious challenges is the provision of affordable housing and the mayor's plan to build 15 new skyscrapers by 2013 has been widely derided. Some say the plan will be the capital's biggest make-over since the aftermath of the Great Fire in 1666.

Despite a long-running feud with the influential right-wing London tabloid the *Evening Standard*, which has tried to smear him with charges ranging from corruption to anti-Semitism, Livingstone continues to enjoy a high level of popularity, which is rare for any elected leader in London. His readmission to a mercurial Labour Party (which quickly realised its mistake in ever taking him on as a rival) confirms that whatever take you have on London's mayor, he remains one of the most important and talented politicians of his time.

In 2008 London will go to the polls again, where Ken is likely to win a third term, meaning he'll control the capital until the Olympic year of 2012. The Conservative search for a big-name candidate to take him on has produced only Boris Johnson, an upper-class MP and media favourite. While popular for his buffoonish ways, it is hard to imagine him running City Hall. But time, as they say, will tell – and almost anything is possible in London.

public account. It currently comprises nine Conservatives, nine Labour Party members, five Liberal Democrats, two members of the Green Party and two members of the One London Group. It has its headquarters in the futuristic GLA building in Southwark, beside Tower Bridge.

The City of London has its own government in the form of the Corporation of London, headed by the Lord Mayor (note that only the City mayor gets to be Lord) and an assortment of oddly named and peculiarly dressed aldermen, beadle and sheriffs. It sits at the Guildhall. These men – and they usually *are* male – are elected by the City of London's freemen and liverymen. Though its government may appear obsolete in the 3rd millennium, the Corporation of London still owns roughly a third of the supremely wealthy 'Square Mile' and has a good record for patronage of the arts.

London is further divided into 33 widely differing boroughs (13 of which are in central London), run by democratically elected councils with significant autonomy. These deal with education and matters such as road sweeping and rubbish collection. The richest borough in terms of per capita income is Richmond in the west; the poorest is Barking in the east.

NATIONAL GOVERNMENT

London is, of course, the seat of the national government of Britain. Britain is a constitutional monarchy with no written constitution and operates under a combination of parliamentary

statutes, common law (a body of legal principles based on precedents, often dating back centuries) and convention.

Parliament is made up of the monarch, the House of Commons (the lower house) and the House of Lords (the upper house). The monarch is essentially a figurehead with no real power, while the House of Commons is where the real power lies. It comprises a national assembly of 646 seats directly elected every four to five years. Each seat represents a constituency somewhere in the country. London is made up of 72 constituencies and thus has 72 representatives in the House of Commons.

The leader of the biggest party in the House of Commons is the prime minister, who appoints a cabinet of 20 or so ministers to run government departments. At the time of writing Prime Minister Gordon Brown's Labour Party held a comfortable majority of 66 MPs over the official opposition, David Cameron's Conservative Party. This majority he inherited from Tony Blair, who won the 2005 general election but then stood down as Prime Minister in June 2007. The next general election is likely to be held in 2009, although legally it could be held as late as 2010.

The Conservatives have been reinvigorated in the past few years after a decade of disarray. Their defenestration of Margaret Thatcher in 1991 tore the party to pieces and only since the arrival of Tony Blair-like Cameron as leader in 2005 has the party regained any sense of unity. Cameron has liberalised the Tories, a political force that the British people often consider to be, in the words of one Tory grandee, 'the nasty party'. By embracing the environment, supporting single mothers and being progay, the Tories are in many ways unrecognisable compared with the 1980s collection of bigoted fat cats spearheaded by Thatcher. Critics point out, though, that despite the veneer of liberal ecofriendly fluff, the party remains utterly that of the establishment, with Cameron and much of his cabinet a product of Eton and Oxbridge.

The only other major political party in the UK is the Liberal Democrats, which currently holds just 63 seats. Despite a distinguished career and impeccable credentials, its leader Sir Ming Campbell is largely considered to have no hope of taking the party to victory due to his age (late 60s) and a perceived lack of charisma compared with the Lib Dems' previous leader, Charles Kennedy, who resigned the leadership in 2003 due to an alcohol problem.

The House of Lords has a little power but these days it's largely limited to delaying legislation – even then, it's only a question of time before it goes to the Queen to be rubber-stamped. For centuries the House of Lords consisted of some 900 'hereditary peers' (whose titles passed from one generation to the next), 25 Church of England bishops and 12 Law Lords (who also act as Britain's highest court). But Tony Blair targeted the Lords with the same zeal with which the mayor went for the Trafalgar Sq pigeons – the similarities possibly end there – and most of the hereditary peers were shuffled out in 1999. Ninety-two of them have been allowed to stay, for the time being. A new system of 'life peerage' was introduced which, critics say, allowed the prime minister to hand out plum jobs to loyal MPs who wouldn't have to go through the bother of getting elected in the future. In the second stage of Lords reform (for which there is no time frame), elected peers will enter the upper house for the first time and hereditary peers will be swept away altogether.

MEDIA

London is in the eye of the British media, an industry comprising some of the best and worst of the world's TV, radio and print media.

NEWSPAPERS

The main London newspaper is the fairly right-wing *Evening Standard*, a tabloid that comes out in early and late editions throughout the day. Foodies should check out the restaurant reviews of London's most influential critic, Fay Maschler, while style aficionados shouldn't miss Friday's *ES* magazine, a useful guide to the city's cutting edge. *Metro Life* is a useful listings supplement on Thursday.

Three free newspapers distributed at tube stations and on the streets wherever commuters can be stopped and a paper shoved in their face also vie for the attentions of Londoners – the *Evening Standard's* 'lite' version, *London Lite*, which is just a free, boiled-down version of the *Evening Standard*; another *Evening Standard* stable mate *Metro*; and the *London Paper*, a Murdoch-owned competitor. All three are lightweight, easy-to-digest reads with a firm focus on celebrity and can be found littering buses or tube carriages all over London.

National newspapers in England are almost always financially independent of any political party, although their political leanings are easily discerned. Rupert Murdoch is the most influential man in British media and his News Corp owns the *Sun*, the *News of the World*, the *Times* and the *Sunday Times*. The industry is self-regulating, having set up the Press Complaints Commission (PCC) in 1991 to handle public grievances, although many complain that the PCC is unable to really maintain any level of discipline among the unruly tabloids, being a 'toothless guard dog'.

There are many national daily newspapers, and competition for readers is incredibly stiff; although some papers are printed outside the capital, they are all pretty London-centric. There are two broad categories of newspapers, most commonly distinguished as broadsheets (or 'qualities') and tabloids, although the distinction is becoming more about content than physical size as most of the major broadsheets are now published in a smaller, easier to use tabloid size.

Readers of the broadsheets are extremely loyal to their paper and rarely switch from one to another. The right-wing *Daily Telegraph* is sometimes considered old-fogeyish, but nonetheless the writing and world coverage are very good. The *Times* is traditionally the newspaper of record and supports the government of the day; it's particularly good for sports. On the left side of the political spectrum, the *Guardian* features lively writing and an extremely progressive agenda, is very strong in its coverage of the arts and has some excellent supplements, particularly Monday's *Media Guardian*, a bible for anyone in the industry. It's also the best paper for white-collar job seeking. Politically correct, the *Independent* has single-issue front pages and rejoices in highlighting stories or issues that other papers have ignored. Its writing can be excellent and it's the paper of choice for nonpolitically aligned centrists and free thinkers.

The Sunday papers are as important as Sunday mornings in London. Most dailies have Sunday stable mates and predictably the tabloids have bumper editions of trashy gossip, star-struck adulation, fashion extras and mean-spirited diatribes directed at whomever they've decided to hunt for sport on that particular weekend. The qualities have so many sections and supplements that two hands are required to carry even one from the shop. The *Observer*, established in 1791, is the oldest Sunday paper and sister of the *Guardian*; there's a brilliant *Sports* supplement with the first issue of the month. Even people who normally only buy broadsheets sometimes slip a copy of the best-selling *News of the World* (sister paper to the *Sun*) under their arm for some Sunday light relief.

See [p396](#) for a list of the major daily and Sunday newspapers.

MAGAZINES

There is an astonishing range of magazines published and consumed here, from celebrity gossip to political heavyweights. Lads' monthlies such as *FHM*, *Loaded* and *Maxim* powered the growth of consumer magazines in the 1990s, as new readers tucked into a regular diet of babes, irreverence and blokeishness.

London loves celebrities (especially when they are overweight, underweight or out of control) and *Heat*, *Closer* and *Grazia* are the most popular purveyors of the genre. US import *Glamour* is the queen of the women's glossies, having toppled traditional favourite *Cosmopolitan*, which is beginning to look a little wrinkled in comparison with its younger, funkier rival – maybe it's time for a nip and tuck. *Marie Claire*, *Elle* and *Vogue* are regarded as the thinking woman's glossies. A slew of style magazines are published here – *i-D*, *Dazed & Confused* and *Vice* – and all maintain a loyal following.

Political magazines are particularly strong in London. The satirical *Private Eye* (see the boxed text, [p52](#)) has no political bias and takes the Mickey out of everyone. You can keep in touch with what's happening internationally with the *Week*, an excellent round-up of the British and foreign press and the excellent *Economist* cannot be beaten for international political and business analysis.

Time Out is the listings guide *par excellence* and great for taking the city's pulse with strong arts coverage while the *Big Issue*, sold on the streets by the homeless, is not just an honourable project but a damned fine read. London is a publishing hub for magazines and produces hundreds of internationally renowned publications specialising in music, visual arts, literature, sport, architecture and so on.

See [p396](#) for a list of the city's main magazines.

PRIVATE EYE LASHES ESTABLISHMENT

'Well at least you won your war' says a grumpy-looking Queen Elizabeth as she addresses Margaret Thatcher in a royal line up having just passed Tony Blair. This is a typical cover of London's best-known satirical magazine, *Private Eye*, a barometer of how well you know what's going on politically and culturally in the country.

It was founded in 1961 by a group of clever clogs that included the late comedian and writer Peter Cook and still retains the low-tech, cut-and-paste charm of the original. It specialises in gossip mongering about the misdeeds of public figures and in the giddy lampooning of anyone who takes themselves too seriously. There are lots of running jokes (the Queen is always referred to as Brenda, for example, Gordon Brown as Gordon Broom), wicked cartoons and regular features such as an editorial from Lord Gnome, a composite of media magnates. There's also a serious investigative side to the mag and its reports have contributed to the downfall of several high-fliers including Jeffrey Archer and Robert Maxwell.

But that it still exists at all is astonishing. It has regularly been sued by its targets and only remains afloat thanks to the charity of its readers. Its future is looking brighter these days with circulation above 600,000 and at its highest level in a decade. *Private Eye* is now far and away the most popular current affairs magazine in the land. Essential reading, even if you don't follow much more than the cartoons.

NEW MEDIA

There's a thriving alternative media scene catering to the many who feel marginalised by the mainstream media, much of which still covers global protests by describing the hairstyles of the 'ecowarriors'. Some sites worth checking out include the outstanding and original *Urban 75* (www.urban75.com), the global network of alternative news at *Indymedia* (<http://uk.indymedia.org>), the weekly activists' newsletter from *SchNews* (www.schnews.org.uk), London-centric blog *Londonist* (www.londonist.com) and the video activists' *Undercurrents* (www.undercurrents.org).

Email magazines have taken off here in a big way, largely because they're so good. *Fridaycities London* (www.fridaytowers.com/tff) is a well-written and exceedingly cheeky weekly mag covering news, culture and current affairs. Online gossip sites have also gained notoriety in recent years by knocking spin on its arse and breaking some big stories about celebrities misbehaving. Check out *Popbitch* (www.popbitch.com) and the satirical technology newsletter *Need to Know* (www.ntk.net).

BROADCASTING

The BBC is one of the greatest broadcasting corporations in the world and one of the standard bearers of radio and TV journalism and programming (see p178). Its independence frequently irks the establishment and it incurred the very significant wrath of the British Government in 2003 because of its courageous probing of the events leading to the invasion of Iraq. When BBC journalist Andrew Gilligan alleged that Tony Blair's then press secretary Alistair Campbell had 'sexed up' a dossier of evidence against the Iraqi regime in order to generate public support for going to war, there was a huge outcry and mutual recriminations between Westminster and White City began. The country's chief weapons expert, Dr David Kelly, committed suicide after being named by the government as the source of the BBC's report, and when the government-appointed Hutton inquiry came down on the BBC as the wrongdoers, almost everybody in the media dismissed it as a whitewash. The BBC's Director General resigned the same day and, chastened, the BBC has since been taking a far less controversial line when it comes to reporting on the government. Just four years later and the corporation found itself in serious trouble again, when a fly-on-the-wall documentary about the Queen purported to show Her Majesty storming out of a photoshoot with Annie Leibowitz after the veteran American photographer asked her to remove her tiara. However, it transpired that the footage of the queen 'storming out' was in fact her entrance to the photo shoot. With egg on its face, the BBC faced a devastating backlash from the public and the rest of the media, and despite an abject apology from Director General Mark Thompson, 2007 was definitely a new low for faith in the corporation.

New media ownership laws introduced in 2003 paved the way for major newspaper proprietors to own British terrestrial TV channels, namely Channel Five and ITV.

Britain still turns out some of the world's best TV programmes, padding out the decent home-grown output with American imports, Australian soaps, inept sitcoms and trashy chat

and game shows of its own. There are five regular TV channels. BBC1 and BBC2 are publicly funded by a TV licensing system and, like BBC radio stations, don't carry advertising; ITV, Channel 4 and Channel Five are commercial channels and do. These regular channels are now competing with the satellite channels of Rupert Murdoch's BSkyB – which offers a variety of channels with less-than-inspiring programmes – and assorted cable channels.

Many listeners and viewers feel that the investment in new technology is damaging to the core channels and that the BBC is spreading itself too thinly, trying to chase ratings and compete with the commercial channels rather than concentrating on its public-service responsibilities. The entire country is gradually switching over to digital TV, and analogue broadcasting will end by 2012.

The BBC broadcasts several radio stations, including BBC 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7 catering to young, mature, classical, intellectual, talkback, mixed and comedy/drama audiences respectively. XFM is your best chance of hearing interesting music these days. In 2007 the government announced Channel 4 was to be awarded a licence to broadcast 10 more national digital radio channels, a huge shake-up for an industry in need of winning back loyal audiences.

FASHION

London has weathered a tough few years that saw its status as an international fashion centre drop, but the city is now back at the heart of the fashion universe boasting a new firmament of young stars who have caught the collective eye of the fashion pack.

Giles Deacon is the undisputed figurehead for the new London and with his witty designs and eclectic references the St Martins graduate has taken London by storm with his own label Giles. Alongside Deacon are other Brit stars with a buzz around them such as Jonathan Saunders, Christopher Kane and Greek-Austrian import Marios Schwab who shows in London and attended the hallowed St Martins as well. Nu-rave darling Gareth Pugh is also someone to look out for, another St Martins alumnus (can you see a pattern emerging? – see the boxed text, below) who has taken the underground club fashions of Shoreditch and transposed them to the shop floor, even having one Anna Wintour in the audience of his 2006 London show. Even New York golden boy Marc Jacobs showed his spring 2007 Marc by Marc Jacobs collection at London fashion week to celebrate the opening of his Mayfair boutique, bringing a much-needed injection of international glamour to the capital's famously edgy fashion week.

The influence of London's designers continues to spread well beyond the capital. The 'British Fashion Pack' still work at, or run, the major Continental fashion houses such as Chanel, Givenchy and Chloe. Meanwhile, regardless of whether they send models down the catwalks here, designers such as Alexander McQueen retain design studios in London, and erstwhile defectors to foreign catwalks such as Luella Bartley and Matthew Williamson have returned to London to show their collections.

London has always been about eccentricity when compared with the classic feel of the major Parisian and Milanese houses, or the cool street-cred of New York designers. Nobody summed up that spirit better than Isabella Blow, the legendary stylist who discovered – among many

ST MARTINS

Most of the stars of the British fashion industry have passed through the rather shabby doors of St Martins on Charing Cross Rd, the world's most famous fashion college. Founded in 1854, Central St Martins School of Art & Design – to give its rather cumbersome and correct title – began life as a place where cultured young people went to learn to draw and paint. In the 1940s a fashion course was created and within a few decades aspiring designers from around the world were scrambling to get in. Courses are more than 100 times oversubscribed these days and the college has faced some criticism for admitting names over talent (a famous Beatles' daughter, to name just one). St Martins graduate shows – for which Stella had friends Naomi Campbell and Kate Moss model – are one of the highlights of the fashion calendar and are *always* shocking, making huge statements, be they good, bad or ridiculous.

The less-conspicuous Royal College of Art only takes postgraduates and its fashion course is just as old and almost as successful as St Martins. Its alumni are said to provide the backbone of some of the world's most prestigious fashion houses.

others – Alexander McQueen, Stella Tennant and Sophie Dahl during her career at *Vogue* and *Tatler*. Blow sadly committed suicide in 2007 and although she wasn't widely known outside of the fashion world, her tragic loss was deeply felt in the fashion industry of the city she worked in. Never seen in public without an extraordinary Philip Treacy hat, Blow's sheer force of personality alone was a great generator of enthusiasm and excitement about London's changing fashion fates and the scene will be far less interesting without her.

An interesting trend that has come out of London over the past couple of years is the celebrity lines being sold in bargain chains. Karl Lagerfeld and Stella McCartney have designed lines for H&M, Kate Moss for Top Shop and Lily Allen for New Look, each one generating huge excitement and – in the case of Kate Moss's critically maligned collection – a virtual stampede from shoppers.

The British fashion industry has always been more on the edge of younger, directional stuff, and never really established that very polished 'Gucci Slick'; the London equivalent is the bespoke men's tailoring of Savile Row. London has no history of real couture like Paris or Milan, where tastes in styles and fabrics are much more classic and refined. The market also shapes British fashion to a large extent; customers here are more likely to spend £100 on a few different bargains – hence the boom in outlet malls – while their sisters in Paris and Italy will blow the lot on one piece, which they'll wear regularly and well.

So London fashion has always been about street wear and 'wow', with a few old reliables keeping the frame in place and mingling with hot new designers who are often unpolished through lack of experience, but bursting with talent and creativity. As a result London is definitely exciting on a global scale and nobody with an interest in street fashion will be disappointed by what they find here.

LANGUAGE

The English language is the country's greatest contribution to the modern world. It is an astonishingly rich language containing an estimated 600,000 uninflected words (compared with, for example, Indonesian's or Malay's 60,000). It's actually a magpie tongue – just as England plundered treasure for its museums, so too the English language dipped into the world's vocabulary, even when it already had several words of the same meaning. Dr Johnson, compiler of the first English dictionary, tried to have the language protected from foreign imports (possibly to reduce his own workload) but failed. As far as English goes, all foreigners are welcome.

English-speakers are spoilt for choice when they go looking for descriptive words such as nouns and adjectives, as you'll discover pretty quickly (fast, swiftly, speedily, rapidly, promptly) by looking in a thesaurus. Some 50 years ago linguists came up with Basic English, a stripped down version with a vocabulary of 850 words, which was all one needed to say just about anything. But where's the fun in that? Shakespeare himself is said to have contributed more than 2000 words, along with hundreds of common idioms such as poisoned chalice, one fell swoop, cold comfort and cruel to be kind.

Be grateful if English is your mother tongue because it's a bitch to learn, and has possibly the most illogical and eccentric approach to spelling and pronunciation of any language. Take the different pronunciation of rough, cough, through, though and bough. Attempts to rationalise

English spelling are passionately resisted by people who see themselves as the guardians of proper English and rail against the American decision to drop the 'u' from words such as colour and glamour.

In terms of accent, Standard English or Received Pronunciation (RP) centres on London and, traditionally, was perceived to be that spoken by the upper classes and those educated at public schools. It is by no means the easiest form to understand; in fact, sometimes it's near impossible ('oh, eye nare' apparently means 'yes, I know'). Those 'what talk posh' despair at the perceived butchering of their

language by most ordinary Londoners, who speak what's come to be known as 'Estuary English', so called because it's a sort of subcockney that spread along the estuary in postwar London. And so a common language divides the city. Even the Queen, claim Australian linguistic researchers, has allowed elements of Estuary pronunciation to sully her clipped RP.

The BBC is considered the arbitrator on the issue, and by comparing the contrived – and frankly hilarious – tone of old newsreels from WWII with today's bulletins, it's obvious that Standard English has gone from posh to a more neutral middle register.

Some say that Estuary English – which can now be heard within a 100-mile radius of the capital – is quickly becoming the standard. Its chief features, according to Stephen Burgen in Lonely Planet's *British phrasebook*, are: rising inflection; constant use of 'innit'; a glottal 'T', rendering the double 'T' in butter almost silent and making 'alright' sound like 'orwhy'; and, in general, a slack-jawed, floppy-tongued way of speaking that knocks the corners off consonants and lets the vowels whine to themselves. The lack of speech rhythm that can result from blowing away your consonants is made good by the insertion of copious quantities of 'fucks' and 'fucking', whose consonants are always given the full nine yards. In London it's not rare to hear people whose speech is so dependent on the word 'fuck' they are virtually dumbstruck without it.

But like just about everything in London, the language is constantly changing, absorbing new influences, producing new slang and altering the meaning of words. The city's ethnic communities are only beginning to have an influence and many young Londoners these days are mimicking Caribbean expressions and what they perceive to be hip-hop speak from black urban America.

As England has absorbed wave after wave of immigrants, so too will the insatiable English language continue to take in all comers. Meanwhile, as class distinctions exist, the linguistic battle for London will rage on.

LONDON'S LANGUAGES

These days you'll encounter a veritable Babel of some 300 languages being spoken in London, and there are pockets of the capital where English is effectively the second language. Head to Southall if you want to see train station signs in Hindi, head to Gerrard St in Soho for telephone boxes with Chinese instructions, Golders Green or Stamford Hill for shop signs in Hebrew and Yiddish and Kingsland Rd for *everything* written in Turkish.

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