

# Holy shit

How to get out of Blackfriars by Nick Asbury

## **Exit 5: What's the point?**

Blackfriars is a miserable, misshapen, browbeaten sort of place. More or less everything about it has been messed up in some way. Pillars stand sheepishly in the Thames, bereft of a bridge to support. Landmarks of breathtaking historical importance are torn down, only to reappear thousands of miles away. Stations hop across the river, realise their mistake and hop back again. Once-noble holy men become fodder for theme pubs. Rivers stagnate into open sewers, disappear underground and bubble up unexpectedly, spewing excrement all over the place.

*Directions: On exiting the barriers, make your way down the maze of tunnels towards Exit 5. Lose heart halfway, retrace your steps and consider going to Temple instead.*

## **Exit 1: You'll feel better after a beer**

Blackfriars takes its name from the black-robed Dominican friars who once held a grand monastic estate here. Their mission was to provide much-needed practical support and spiritual sustenance to the City's labouring classes and thousands of malnourished poor. Today, their influence lives on in the names of several decent bars and restaurants: The 11th Commandment (platters, cocktails, candles); The Evangelist (Modern European, pricey); and the Black Friar itself. This incongruous, wedge-shaped pub looks like it got off at the wrong stop on the tube and decided to stick around anyway. It used to be an office block, but was expensively converted in 1905 by the architect H. Fuller Clarke. He called in the Royal Academy sculptor Henry Poole to create the exterior's ornate façade, along with its marbled walls, pillared fireplaces and bas-reliefs of monks playing out various scenes, accompanied by tangentially-related mottos: 'Wisdom is rare', 'Finery is foolery', 'Don't advertise, tell a gossip' and so on. Somewhat unfairly, the Black Friar has been described as the nation's first ever theme pub, but it remains a unique example of urban Arts and Crafts architecture and decoration at its best. The only problem is that it has occasionally been known to smell a bit.

*Directions: Head straight up the steps at Exit 1 and follow your nose.*

### **Exit 6: An interesting drain cover**

Blackfriars is a river mouth. It's where the Fleet meets the Thames, having flowed all the way down from Hampstead, through Kentish Town and St Pancras, round Clerkenwell Hill and under Holborn Bridge. Although shallow, the river was once wide enough to accommodate a fair amount of shipping – a rusty anchor was found as far north as Kentish Town. However, by the 16th century, it had become almost completely clogged up with rubbish and raw sewage. There were increasingly desperate attempts to clean it, all doomed to failure. Sir Christopher Wren even got involved at one point and the lower part of the river was widened into a canal, while the section north of Holborn to the City wall was covered over. Unfortunately, the new canal still acted as a sewage-magnet and the stench became steadily more obnoxious.

In 1732, the authorities admitted defeat and bricked the whole thing over from Holborn Bridge to Fleet Street, and later from Fleet Street down to the Thames. But the river fought back. In 1846, it burst out of its brick casing and engulfed the streets above in a tidal wave of raw sewage. A steamboat was crushed against Blackfriars Bridge. Even today, building works along the route of the river have to be pumped out regularly and the waters can flood the roadway in severe storms. All this may well have something to do with the funny smell in the Black Friar.

*Directions: As you come out by the river, follow the walkway beneath the road bridge. Under the first arch, when the water is low enough, you can see a large, metal, arch-shaped drain cover. It's the only visible sign of where the Fleet flows into the Thames.*

### **Exit 2: Pursued by a bear**

Blackfriars is actually quite a likeable place. Just a short stroll north of the station lies Playhouse Yard. This is where the Blackfriars Playhouse used to stand, the theatre in which several of Shakespeare's greatest plays were first performed. In terms of cultural importance, it's perhaps second only to The Globe, on the other side the river. But is there a reconstruction of the Blackfriars Playhouse? No. Maybe a visitor centre? No again. Surely a plaque of some sort? Well, best not to make a fuss about it.

Carry on walking towards Ireland Yard and you'll see the Cockpit Tavern, site of the gatehouse that Shakespeare bought in 1612. This is one of the few solid facts that we know about Shakespeare's life. His signature is on the deeds. But, again, nothing to mark the spot, not so much as a plaque. Blackfriars wears its history lightly, with a casual shrug. There's something heart-warming about it.

*Directions: Head straight on, under the bridge, across Queen Victoria Street, up Blackfriars Lane and Playhouse Yard is on your right. Facilities include a circular bench, with some shrubs in the middle.*

### **Exit 9: Staunton, Virginia, USA**

As it turns out, the Americans are already doing the Shakespeare heritage job for us. If you're ever passing through the town of Staunton, Virginia, you'll see signs everywhere pointing you towards the Blackfriars Playhouse. The theatre was built in 2001 as a faithful replica of the one that once stood in London EC4 (or as faithful as the available evidence allows). They're even planning to build their own version of The Globe next

door. It's tempting to build a replica of Staunton City Hall in Playhouse Yard, just to even things up a bit.

*Directions: Exit 9 is next to the main ticket office in the overground station. Ignore it and take the Thameslink northbound to Gatwick instead. Book yourself on the next flight to Philadelphia, then catch a short connecting flight to Shenandoah Regional Valley Airport in Virginia. Take a cab to Staunton and ask for the Blackfriars Playhouse on South Market Street.*

### **Exit 8: Lonely, lacklustre and laughable**

Shakespeare would often have made the walk from Blackfriars to St. Paul's to browse around its thriving bookstalls. In 1604, he might even have flicked through a copy of *A Table Alphabeticall* – the first ever English-to-English dictionary, compiled by Robert Cawdrey and sold at the North Door of St Paul's. The dictionary had only 2,500 entries and Shakespeare probably wouldn't have been overly impressed. Scholars have worked out that his vocabulary stretched to about 30,000 words, twice that of most educated people today. To be fair, he did make up a lot of them himself. Advertising, besmirch, elbow, hobnob, lonely, lacklustre and laughable all entered the language somewhere in the vicinity of Blackfriars. In fact, the area has reasonable grounds to call itself the linguistic and literary capital of London.

In 1755, Dr. Johnson published his *Dictionary of the English Language*, the result of nine years' painstaking work at his house in Gough Square, just half a mile or so north of Blackfriars station. Samuel Pepys was born over the road in Salisbury Court. John Milton had lodgings in St Bride's churchyard and probably saw a few plays at Blackfriars Playhouse, before it closed in 1642 and was eventually demolished in 1655. St Bride's Church also remains the spiritual home of British journalism – a connection that can be traced all the way back to 1501, when William Caxton's assistant, the brilliantly named Wynkyn de Worde, set up England's first moveable-type press in the churchyard.

*Directions: Straight up the main road, left at Bride Lane, left again at Fleet Street, right at Bolt Court and up into Gough Square, retrace your steps to Fleet Street, down through Salisbury Court and back towards Blackfriars, then along Queen Victoria Street and left up Godliman Street to St Paul's. Shakespeare also coined the phrase 'wild goose chase'.*

### **Exit 7: Some scaffolding**

With all that sewage swilling about beneath Blackfriars, it's reassuring to know there's a local company dedicated to supplying us with products like Cif and Domestos. Unilever House is pretty spectacular as corporate headquarters go, its sweeping art deco exterior lending a welcome air of grandeur to an area somewhat in need of it. At the time of writing, the building is undergoing a two-year facelift, so there's not a great deal to see. But there is talk of including some sort of public gallery space in the revamped interior, so it may soon be possible to have a good nose around. It would be in keeping with a place where business and the arts have maintained an ambiguous, but generally healthy, relationship. Unilever is also the sponsor of the aptly named Unilever Series at Tate Modern, itself a good example of the arts flourishing in the spaces industry leaves behind.

*Directions: As you come out of Exit 7, you'll see Unilever House straight ahead of you, or at least you will when they take the scaffolding and hoardings down.*

### **Exit 3: A bridge abridged**

The two-and-a-half bridges of Blackfriars have a complicated history. The road bridge was originally opened in 1769, during a great flurry of bridge building that marked the real birth of South London. (Until the eighteenth century, London Bridge was the only option.) The bridge was rebuilt a century later and now carries about 54,000 vehicles a day. In 1864, the first railway bridge came along, designed for the London, Chatham and Dover Railway Company and serving Blackfriars station, which opened in the same year and stood on the South Bank. This is the bridge that has now become something of a folly. Unable to cope with the heavier, modern trains, it fell into disrepair. Its fate was sealed when a bigger, brasher, wrought-iron bridge opened in 1886 – the railway bridge that is still in use now. With it came a new station on the North Bank, originally called St. Paul's. The South Bank Blackfriars closed and eventually, in 1937, St. Paul's stole its name.

If you go up to the overground station, you can still see a wall displaying the names of the stations served by the original Blackfriars, with destinations ranging from Margate to Marseilles. One final twist: the situation is likely to get more confusing if the inauspiciously-named Thameslink 2000 project ever gets off the ground. The plans include extending the platforms right across the river, with a new entrance on the South Bank and glass awnings covering the length of the bridge.

*Directions: Head up the steps and out across the bridge. Gaze at the surreal rows of red pillars on your left, complete with the proud insignia of the London, Chatham and Dover Railway Company.*

### **Exit 4: Final**

As with most bridges in London, Blackfriars is one of those haunted places where many have come to take their own lives. Roberto Calvi may or may not have been one of them. Known as God's Banker for his links with the Vatican, he was the Chairman of Banco Ambrosiano in Milan, but became a central figure in a complex web of international fraud and intrigue. He had been missing for nine days when his body was discovered by a passer-by in June 1982, hanging from some scaffolding under the bridge, just above the riverside walkway. It was later revealed he had five bricks in his pockets, along with \$15,000 in various currencies. An initial inquest verdict of suicide was overturned and the case remains unsolved – although, at the time of writing, four people are about to go on trial. Murmurings of Masonic links and Mafia connections have grown more insistent over the years.

*Directions: Wander around morbidly under the bridge where God's Banker met his end and ponder what the Dominican friars might have made of it all.*

### **Exit 10: Holy shit**

Blackfriars has its fair share of ghost stories. One concerns the church of St Andrew's-by-the-Wardrobe, which is one of the few stable points in the whole of Blackfriars – a church has stood on the site since the twelfth

century. One of its three bells, which used to hang in the church of Avenbury in Herefordshire, is said to ring of its own accord whenever a vicar of Avenbury dies. Round the back lies Wardrobe Place, once the site of the King's store room. Here, a lady dressed in white is said to drift aimlessly from door to door, although she is so timid that she disappears if you stare directly at her.

Finally, there's the Old Deanery in Dean's Court, once the residence of the Dean of St Paul's. It's said to be haunted by all manner of demons, although this was denied by the Very Reverend Martin Sullivan, who was Dean until 1977. He was sure the strange creaks and bumps that the rest of his family heard must have a rational explanation – probably something to do with the central heating. However, there was one thing that did bother him. His toilet-roll holder always used to go “decidedly wonky” whenever someone else was in the toilet, only to right itself again by the time he was called to fix it. He's reported to have said that, “Since I can't conceive of a haunted toilet-roll holder, I can only put it down to my skill at do-it-yourself.”

Perhaps he was right. Maybe the mysterious toilet-roll holder was merely a reminder of the fallibility of all human endeavour, rather than a conduit for supernatural forces. Nevertheless, there must have been times when this man of God sat on the toilet of his Blackfriars home, reached for the toilet paper and wondered.

*Directions: Exit 10 takes you out onto a concrete walkway that looks towards St Andrew's-by-the-Wardrobe. Don't take it – it's scary out there. Head back to the overground station and walk along the platform and out over the bridge. It's the best place to wait for a train in London, and not a bad way to get out of Blackfriars.*