OCCULT LONDON

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Other Pocket Essentials by Merlin Coverley:

*London Writing*
*Psychogeography*
To Cate
The secret routines are uncovered at risk & the point is that the objective is nonsense & the scientific approach a bitter farce unless it is shot through with high occulting fear & need & awe of mysteries & does not demean or explain in scholarly babytalk

Iain Sinclair, *Lud Heat*
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Occult (adj.) Kept secret, esoteric; recondite, mysterious, beyond the range of ordinary knowledge; involving the supernatural, mystical, magical; not obvious on inspection. Occult (vb.) Conceal, cut off from view by passing in front, (usu. Astron., of concealing body much greater in apparent size than concealed body). ¹

London is a city whose origins remain obscure and whose identity remains bound up with the mythical and the legendary, the hidden and the occult. In the absence of any solid evidence, London’s pre-Roman history remains a mystery, the most influential voice belonging to the twelfth-century cleric Geoffrey of Monmouth, whose History of the Kings of Britain seeks to explain the origins of Roman Londinium through recourse to the city of Troy and the figure of King Brutus:

Once he had divided up his kingdom, Brutus decided to build a capital. In pursuit of this plan, he visited every part of the land in search of a suitable spot. He came at length to the River Thames, walked up and down its banks and so chose a site suited to his purpose. There then he built a city and called it Troia Nova. It was known by this name for long ages after, but finally by a corruption of the word it came to be called Trinovantum. ²
As the story goes, Brutus, the Trojan great-grandson of Aeneas and descendent of Judah, established the city of Trinovantum on the bank of the Thames in c. 1100 BC. But it was much later, in 113 BC, that the city was refortified by King Lud who, having constructed the walls and towers, renamed it in his own honour as Caer Lud, the name gradually giving way to Caerlundein, Londinium, and finally London. Buried at Ludgate, the westernmost gate of the city wall, he is remembered today in the names of Ludgate Hill, Circus, Square and Broadway.

Geoffrey of Monmouth’s account was no doubt born of a competitive desire to provide London with a history as old and as grand as that of Rome itself. And these early myths and counter-myths, in which the more straightforward Roman history is welded to an exotic, but wholly unsubstantiated, strand of Celtic folklore, demonstrate the way in which London’s past remains a contested one, as new histories, both the official and the more unorthodox, continue to be generated. Indeed, in Tudor times, a new version of Geoffrey of Monmouth’s tale was to emerge, in which Brutus captures the two native giants, Gog and Magog, only to return them to London to be used as porters at the gates of his palace. Over time these two figures have themselves come to be seen as guardians of the city, their effigies frequently used to symbolise London in displays of civic pageantry, and today their statues can be found in the Guildhall.

Of course, any attempt to provide an exhaustive account of London’s occult heritage would result in a history as extensive as any of those official accounts that aim to capture the city in its entirety. For London’s occult history is less a chapter within a larger work than an alternative method of appre-
hending the city, albeit an unconventional one. Inevitably, therefore, this guide is forced to limit itself to an illustrative sample from London’s occult archive, a brief introduction to a subject whose mastery would require a lifetime’s study. Regarding the occult not simply as a series of isolated episodes but rather as a continuous history which unfolds, largely unacknowledged, behind that of our everyday experience, I have chosen in this account to focus chronologically upon those historical periods in which the occult comes momentarily to the forefront of the public imagination, before returning once again to a position of obscurity.

From the Elizabethan era, in which the occult was often indistinguishable from the emerging New Science of the Enlightenment, to the occult reconfiguration of the city in the early eighteenth century; from the flowering of occult interest in fin de siècle London, to the occult revival that we are experiencing today. Throughout these periods, London’s history may be characterised as a tale of two cities, in which the rational façade of scientific and economic progress is offset by the existence of another city, governed by quite different imperatives. This other London, which exists behind or below the one which is commonly experienced, has provoked visions of the city celebrated by writers from Blake to de Quincey, Stevenson to Machen, as well as in the work of contemporary figures such as Peter Ackroyd and Iain Sinclair. And, in its exploration of this hidden city, Occult London may be read as a companion to my earlier contributions to the Pocket Essentials series, London Writing and Psychogeography, both of which involve a similar engagement with the Matter of London.

But when we talk of the occult, what exactly do we mean?
Definitions seem to be as nebulous as the supernatural phenomena they purport to describe. The only point of unity appears to be an academic dismissiveness toward the occult itself and an uneasy mistrust of its practitioners: ‘Claims for the ubiquity of occult influence on aesthetic culture are commonly received as allegations, reflecting scholarly fear of the occult. It seems to be widely believed that any contact with the occult is rather like contact with an infectious and incurable disease.’ Elsewhere, the occult has been described as ‘a residual category, a wastebasket, for knowledge claims that are deviant in some way’, accurately capturing the perception of this subject as an umbrella under which a collection of generally disreputable pseudo-sciences and bizarre practices can find shelter. Thus, a number of adjectives are widely employed under this heading, often interchangeably, to suggest an occult influence. Amongst them are: uncanny, secret, hidden, esoteric and obscure. The historian of the occult, Gary Lachman, notes the root of the word in the Latin *occultum*, to hide, and links its use with the astronomical term ‘occultation’, in which ‘one heavenly body obscures or “occcludes” another by passing in front of it’.

I will not be pursuing a rigorous attempt at definition here, but will instead be employing the term in a twofold sense, both to refer to the esoteric traditions with which it is commonly identified and, more broadly, to the search for that which has been hidden or overlooked, which such a tradition entails. For, ultimately, the occult may be seen to represent much more than merely a footnote to the official version. Instead it comes to symbolise those neglected quarters of the city and their forgotten histories, whose very peculiarity often acts as a welcome corrective to the more anodyne as-
pects of London’s carefully managed past, and which continue, by their very existence, to resist all attempts to overwrite or erase them.

Notes

The Occult in Elizabethan London

The Elizabethan world was populated, not only by tough sea-men, hard-headed politicians, serious theologians. It was a world of spirits, good and bad, fairies, demons, witches, ghosts, conjurors.

Frances Yates,
The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age

Elizabethan London was the boom-town of Europe. Occupying roughly the same area as today’s financial heartland, the City, London more than doubled in population during Elizabeth’s long rein (1558–1603), dwarfing its domestic rivals, Bristol and Norwich, and soon becoming the largest and most congested city in Europe. The Elizabethan city was walled on three sides and open to the Thames on its southern perimeter. These walls were gated in the North at Aldersgate, Cripplegate, Moorgate, Bishopsgate and Aldgate, with the Tower to the East and the prisons of Ludgate and Newgate to the West. The Thames, London’s busiest thoroughfare, was spanned only by a single bridge, whose gatehouse tower was adorned with the heads of executed traitors. On the Surrey side, the borough of Southwark, with its famous playhouses and ‘stews’ or brothels, soon became home to those seeking refuge from the jurisdiction of the City. This was a city of
sharp contrasts, as extreme wealth and abject poverty stood side by side and disease-ridden slums soon gave way to pockets of rural tranquillity. But, transcending these differences in status, the average Londoner was united by a belief in, and an observance of, the rituals and practices of occult power.

The format of such occult beliefs varied widely, from the practical application of folk-medicine on the one hand, to the arcane formulae of the astrologer on the other. But it was the medieval Catholic Church that provided the most widely accessible and officially sanctioned form of ritualistic magic; confession and absolution, conjuration and consecration, exorcism and healing all offered an outlet, to rich and poor, to assuage the trials of everyday life. And, of course, it was exactly such an outlet that was to be challenged by the Reformation as the newly established Church of England ‘almost literally took the magic out of Christianity’. Elizabeth was to annul the brief return to Catholicism espoused by her predecessor, Mary, and, in formally adopting this alternative brand of Christianity, she was to deny access to these magical resources. What had previously been interpreted literally was now to become symbolic as the emphasis moved from the miraculous to the mundane; prayer and unceasing effort were now the order of the day.

Predictably enough, this official version had little to offer the mass of Londoners who were seeking to escape the deprivations of their everyday existence rather than attempting to mend their ways and, in the absence of an institution able to provide such relief, alternatives were sought elsewhere. With no shortage of men and women willing to fulfil such a role, Elizabethan London soon became home to an emerging class of occult professionals, variously termed ‘cunning men’,
Dr John Dee is a complex figure whose extraordinary life exemplifies the contradictory role of the occult in the London of his day. Dee is, as Frances Yates proclaimed, the true Renaissance Man, his abilities as an alchemist and conjuror of angels offset by concrete achievements in both mathematics and science and tempered by a fervent sense of patriotism and devout Christian beliefs.

Like his fellow Londoner, Simon Forman, Dee was a prolific diarist whose records have been preserved, largely thanks to the antiquary Elias Ashmole, in the Bodleian Library in Oxford. It is here that one may find the horoscope of Dee’s birth, which took place on 13 July 1527 and which is marked by the latitude of 51 degrees and 32 seconds north of the equator, the approximate latitude of London. It is probable that Dee was born in the City where his father was employed as a textile merchant. In 1542, at the age of 15, Dee entered Cambridge University and, having demonstrated a precocious ability in mathematics and astronomy, he became a fellow of Trinity College in 1547. For the next few years, Dee travelled widely on the Continent, studying alongside the cartographer Gerard Mercator in Louvain, before returning to London in 1553. By this time Dee’s father, who had prospered during the property boom in London following the dissolution of the monasteries, was now caught up in the anti-protestant backlash that accompanied Queen Mary’s reign. Dee was forced to fend for himself and soon he too came under suspicion and
was arrested in 1555, possibly as a result of compiling a horoscope for Mary’s sister, Elizabeth. During this period, magic and science were judged as largely indistinguishable and horoscopes were illegal, amounting to a form of illicit surveillance. In his biography of Dee, Benjamin Woolley has described the inter-relationship between magic and science in Dee’s work:

Thus, at the heart of Dee’s science lay what has come to be called ‘natural’ (as opposed to supernatural) magic. When God created the universe itself, an act that Dee accepted to be beyond scientific understanding, He let loose a divine force which causes the planets to turn, the Sun to rise and the Moon to wax and wane. Magic, as Dee saw it, is the human ability to tap into this force. The better our understanding of the way it drives the universe, the more powerful the magic becomes. In other words, magic is technology.

In 1558, Queen Elizabeth ascended to the throne, entering London to a rapturous reception less than a week after Mary’s death. Dee was now in the clear and it was he who was instructed to use his astrological skills to choose an auspicious date for her coronation. He chose 15 June 1559 and, from a position of shame and suspicion, Dee was now elevated to the role of ‘intelligencer’, an Elizabethan term describing ‘a seeker of hidden knowledge, philosophical and scientific, as well as a spy’. For the next five years there is no historical record of Dee’s activities although it is probable that he used this time in a study of the Cabbala, simply translated as ‘tradition’, which is the ancient form of Hebrew mysticism com-
bining words and numbers to reveal the hidden language of God. In 1564 Dee published his most famous occult work, the *Monas Hieroglyphica*, in which he identifies the ultimate symbol of occult knowledge.

By the 1560s, Dee had settled eight miles downstream of London in what was then the village of Mortlake. It was here, in his mother’s cottage, that he set about establishing one of the largest libraries in Europe. Dee’s Mortlake home gradually came to be perceived as a centre for magical activity. Many notable figures came to pay their respects to Dee and to witness his extraordinary collection of occult books and devices. Indeed, Queen Elizabeth herself is known to have visited Dee on at least two occasions and, in 1577, Dee presented Elizabeth with his *magnum opus*, the four-volume *General and Rare Memorials Pertaining to the Perfect Art of Navigation*, described by Woolley as ‘one of the earliest authoritative statements of the idea of a British Empire’. Whilst ignored at the time and overlooked ever since, Dee’s geopolitical blockbuster has proved remarkably astute and his key prescription that an enlarged navy could provide England with the security to realise her imperial ambitions was, of course, to be proven accurate.

However, Dee’s political concerns were soon to give way to the notorious occult practices by which he was to be remembered. For many years Dee had been attempting, unsuccessfully, to establish contact with the spirit world. But, in 1582, Dee was to record his first successful contact using his speculum or ‘scrying’ mirror of polished obsidian (now on display in the British Museum). A scryer was a spirit medium and Dee would often employ such figures on his behalf. It was his fateful meeting with such a figure, the forger and conman
extraordinaire, Edward Kelley, in 1582 that allowed Dee’s desire to commune with angels to be finally satisfied. Kelley seems to have had Dee under his sway from the outset and Dee was soon persuaded of Kelley’s unique ability as a medium. By the following year, Dee, Kelley and their entire families left Mortlake for the Continent, embarking on a bizarre six-year occult odyssey that would lead ultimately to their installation as alchemists at the court of the Holy Roman Empire Rudolf II in Prague. Little is known about the purpose behind this visit and whether it was conducted primarily for occult or for political motives. But this period has since become the stuff of legend, as the credulous Dee and his unscrupulous sidekick crossed Europe in a series of unlikely episodes. Needless to say, this relationship ended badly and Dee returned to England in 1589 without Kelley, but not before Kelley had persuaded Dee of the magical necessity for him to sleep with his long-suffering wife.

As Frances Yates was to write, Dee’s return to England marks the last and least happy period of his life: ‘After Dee’s activities abroad, he received no reward on his return home, and was never adequately rewarded for his outstanding contribution to the greatness of Elizabethan England. Semi-banishment, ill-success and poverty were to be his fate…’

Returning to Mortlake, Dee found his cottage in ruins, his library ransacked and his occult equipment destroyed. Aged 62, his friends dead, the court unrecognisable, he was now isolated and in poverty. He remained in London, determined to restore his fortunes, but this proved futile. Now a figure of mistrust, he was blamed by many Londoners for the outbreak of the plague in the early 1590s. Finally, in 1597, he was appointed to the position of warden to Christ’s College in
Manchester, and he remained there in semi-exile for the next ten years before returning to London. He died there in 1608 and was buried in Mortlake.

After his death, Dee’s reputation moved swiftly downhill and he was largely dismissed from the official histories of the Elizabethan era. However, as Woolley notes, ‘the one place where Dee’s reputation thrived was in the world of modern mysticism’. Indeed, Dee has since been cited as the founder of the Rosicrucian movement, was seen as the English Nostrodamus in the nineteenth century and was adopted by the Golden Dawn at the start of the twentieth. More recently, however, it was the publication of Frances Yates’ *The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age* in 1979 that led to a reassessment of Dee’s position in the light of Yates’ argument that it was Dee’s marriage of magic and science as a ‘Christian Cabalist’ that provided the dominant philosophy of the Elizabethan age. Elsewhere, Dee lives on through a parallel existence in print and on film. From Gustav Meyrink’s *The Angel from the West Window* to Peter Ackroyd’s *The House of Doctor Dee*, in which Dee is transported from Mortlake to Clerkenwell, and on through Derek Jarman’s *Jubilee*, Dee has been repeatedly resurrected. If Yates returned Dee to his rightful position within Elizabethan history, however, he has today become emblematic of London history and has taken on an iconic role within London psychogeography. With his appealing blend of the occult and the political, allied to his work as a cartographer, Dee appears to satisfy many of the requirements of contemporary psychogeography and its search for lines of resonance through London’s occult past. Indeed, one may ask whether Dee is not in fact the first psychogeographer. Through Dee, Mortlake has become a stop on the psy-
chogeographical London circuit and Iain Sinclair has placed Dee within a visionary London tradition: ‘Blake at Lambeth, Dee at Mortlake, Pope at Twickenham, Ballard at Shepperton: the great British tradition of expulsion, indifference. The creation of alternate universes that wrap like Russian dolls around a clapped-out core.’

Today Dee’s influence extends beyond his London home and he appears to have become caught up in a psychogeographical tug of war, as Manchester, no doubt eager to supplement its more modest occult history, seeks to claim him for its own. In 1996, the Manchester Area Psychogeographic gathered to celebrate the 400th anniversary of Dee’s exile to Manchester, ambitiously proclaiming their intention to levitate the Corn Exchange. ‘What’s the latter-day importance of Dee living in Manchester?’, they asked, and, instead of the obvious answer, they replied:

Dee and Manchester form a focal point in the invention and realization of everything we have to live through and deal with: mechanization, post-industrialisation, the simulacra of “nationhood” and “the state”. To enter Dee’s world of Jacobean Manchester can initiate a deconstruction of now.

Of course, the final word must go to London, Dee’s home for most of his life. The London Psychogeographical Association, in their largely overlooked piece, ‘Nazi Occultists Seize Omphalos’, return Dee to his rightful position at the centre of the city and the British Empire that he did so much to inaugurate:
Many people believe that Greenwich is in fact the Omphalos – or spiritual centre – of the British Empire. However, those with a deeper understanding of Feng Shui, the ancient Chinese art of land divination, will recognise that the actual Omphalos must be on the Isle of Dogs, protected by water on all sides. Those who visit the Mudchute – a piece of park mysteriously built as an exact replica of an ancient hill fort – will find a special staircase leading to a cobbled circle. This is the Omphalos, the spiritual centre, where the Magus John Dee conjured up the British Empire in the presence of Christopher Marlowe, four hundred years ago this year. However, using the leyline for such evil purposes necessitated the sacrifice of a human life. A psychic attack on Christopher Marlowe and his friends in a Deptford pub led to a brawl in which the famous playwright died.14

Dr Simon Forman (1552–1611)

In terms of his occult reputation, Dr Simon Forman is something of a poor relation to Dr Dee and has received little of the posthumous fame accorded to his sometime rival. Although the two men inhabited the same city for much of the latter part of Elizabeth’s reign, it appears that their lives in no way intersected. For while Dee was to become the most renowned astrologer and scientist of his day (in Elizabethan times these two terms were barely distinguishable) and was at one time patronised by the Queen herself, Forman was the outsider who struggled to establish himself in his adopted city and was later to achieve a posthumous and largely unwarranted notoriety.
Thankfully, through his pioneering use of medical notes as well as his diaries and an autobiography of his early years, the details of his life and experiences in London have been preserved and are held by the Bodleian Library in Oxford. Forman was born on 31 December 1552 in Quidhampton in Wiltshire and was educated sporadically both there and in neighbouring Salisbury before spending a year at Oxford University. His time in Oxford, however, appears to have been spent largely as a servant rather than as a student and his attempts to gain an education were repeatedly hampered by his humble origins and the need to support himself financially. For many years, he was apprenticed to a local merchant trading in herbal medicines, and it was during this time that he developed his knowledge of such remedies. After an itinerant period in which he held several jobs and spent the first of several spells in gaol for acting as an unlicensed physician, Forman made his first visit to London in 1580. This initial entry into the city has been described by Forman’s biographer, Judith Cook:

The approach to the City from the south and west was through countryside; fields and orchards reached as far as the outskirts of Lambeth and Southwark, then suddenly the traveller was plunged into the sprawl of Bankside. For the newly arrived Simon it was neither its stink and bustle nor the wonders of the great buildings across the river that he first thought worthy of note, but the fact that immediately on arrival he was solicited by ‘a cozening quean [slut]’ pretending to be his sister. He stoutly refused her advances, though it must have been the last time he ever turned down such an offer.\textsuperscript{15}
As an innocent abroad on the streets of the Elizabethan city, Forman would have faced a bewildering and dangerous environment and he soon retreated outside the (then) city to Greenwich, where he was briefly employed as a carpenter. Indeed, this soon became a pattern. Brief forays into the city were followed by prolonged returns to his native Wiltshire. These early years, as Forman struggled to acquire the necessary knowledge of medicine and astrology and to establish himself as a physician, are recorded in his autobiography, written in around 1600. But the first truly noteworthy year for Forman was 1582 when, after an unusually abstemious period of 29 years, he finally lost his virginity. From then on Forman appears to have made up for lost time and he records in meticulous detail his astonishing series of sexual conquests in which, writing in code, he appears to have managed to ‘halek’ almost every woman he came across. An entry for February 1583, for example, reads: ‘I did halek cum (with) two women… we went to London and lay there until we had spent all.’

During the late 1580s a climate of fear developed, as the country braced itself for a possible Spanish invasion, and against this backdrop Forman’s reputation began to reach the medical authorities and his occult activities were viewed with increasing suspicion. But Forman’s interests in astrology and necromancy were by no means unique in the context of medical practices that had changed little since the time of Galen more than a millennium before. His treatments were astrologically based, as was common at this time, and many Londoners would habitually pay not only to see what was in store for them medically but also to seek answers in other matters from questions of love and marriage to help in find-
ing lost possessions. The antipathy his activities created in the medical establishment was probably due to no more than a straightforward dislike for an untrained outsider who was apparently prospering and had a large and often distinguished list of clients.

By 1590 at the age of 38, Forman was finally in a position to establish a permanent practice in London, taking a lease on rooms in the Stone House in Billingsgate. This building on Thames Street, east of London Bridge, was ideal in attracting custom from both the nearby port and the thriving commercial centre of East Cheap. Forman was to remain here for many years, but what was really to raise his profile amongst his fellow Londoners was his decision to remain in the city during the plague outbreak of 1592/3. As thousands died and many of his fellow practitioners fled the city, Forman continued to treat patients and, in an astonishing advertisement for the efficacy of his own methods, he successfully treated himself with ‘strong waters’ after he had contracted the plague on a visit to Ipswich. Forman’s successes allowed him to move to the fringes of established London society and, whilst he remained an outsider, his name began to be connected with other notables of the day. It is probable that his interest in science and astrology would have led him to attend meetings of the group that came to be known as the School of Night, a loose alliance of like-minded individuals centred around Walter Raleigh and Henry Percy, the ‘Wizard Earl’ of Northumberland. Christopher Marlowe was also a member of this group of occult enthusiasts and such associations could, at this time, prove extremely dangerous.

In 1601, Forman, repeatedly harassed by the College of Physicians on Knightrider Street, moved beyond their juris-
diction, setting up practice on the other side of the river in Lambeth and, in 1603, he was finally accorded a licence to practise by Cambridge University. With a thriving practice and a young wife he had married a few years before, as well as continuing vigorously to hale a variety of women as the opportunity arose, Forman lived out a largely contented and, by the standards of the day, long-lived existence, dying at the age of 59, in accordance with his own prophesy, on 8 September 1611. Yet Forman’s story does not end here, for barely three years after his death his name was to be revived in connection with the notorious Overbury poisoning case and he was to gain a posthumous reputation as ‘devil Forman’ that has remained largely intact ever since.

Shortly before his death, Forman was approached by Anne Turner, an intermediary acting on behalf of Frances Howard, the Countess of Essex. He became her adviser on a number of matters, but primarily those concerning her relationship with her then husband who was reputedly impotent. Unwittingly, Forman had entered a world of political intrigue that he was to die largely oblivious to. For, some two years after his death, in 1613, Sir Thomas Overbury, a friend and advisor to the king’s ‘favourite’ Viscount Rochester, was placed in the Tower and, after developing a mystery illness, he died. It soon turned out that he had been poisoned and the Countess of Essex was accused of his murder. One of her co-accused was the almost certainly innocent Anne Turner, who had visited Forman before his death, and the prosecution, attempting to blacken her name, seized upon this relationship with Forman as evidence of some unholy conspiracy. Soon the all-but-forgotten Forman had been resurrected in the guise of a charlatan and black magician and Turner was branded,
preposterously, ‘the daughter of the devil Forman’. Needless to say, Turner was found guilty and hanged and Forman gained a quite unwarranted reputation.

Today, Forman’s name has, to some extent, been restored through the study of his medical records, which reveal a surprisingly open-minded and, by the standards of the day, effective practitioner, whose use of case histories was both meticulous and innovative. But these facts appear rather prosaic when set alongside the image of a dark conjuror and adept of the black arts and so, to many, Forman’s epitaph will remain that painted by Richard Niccols in his poem of 1616, *Sir Thomas Overbury’s Vision*, in which the ghost of Anne Turner recounts her fateful voyage across the Thames to visit devil Forman in his Lambeth lair:

So over Thames, as o’er th’ infernal lake,
A wherry with its oars I oft did take,
Who Charon-like did waft me to that strand
Where Lambeth town to all well known doth stand.
Where Forman was, that fiend in human shape,
Oft there the Black Enchanter, with sad looks,
Sat turning over his blasphemous books,
Making strange characters in blood-red lines.
Oft would he intreat the fiends below,
In the sad house of endless pain and woe,
And threaten them as if he could compel
Those damned spirits to confirm his spell.20
Witches and Witchcraft: The Mary Glover Case

Despite those images of witchcraft in the popular imagination in which covens of broomstick-wielding crones babble incoherent curses and young virgins are dispatched in sinister ceremonies, the realities of the witch ‘craze’ of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were, on this side of the Channel at least, rather more prosaic. Indeed, witchcraft, as far as the figures for official prosecutions reveal, was, throughout Elizabeth’s reign, a persistent but decidedly small-scale affair. The Witchcraft Act was passed in 1563, imposing the death penalty on those guilty of ‘invocations or conjurations of evil… spirits’ and of killing by witchcraft but, as Lisa Picard points out, such legislation is in itself no acknowledgement of a widespread belief in such phenomena. In fact, the Elizabethan era was a time of widespread scepticism about the role of witches, who were often seen less as possessors of occult powers than simply skilful practitioners in the art of duping the gullible. Certainly, two of the most significant texts of the period, Reginald Scot’s *Discoverie of Witchcraft* (1584) and George Gifford’s *A Dialogue Concerning Witches and Witchcraft* (1593), emphasise exactly such an interpretation of the nature of witchcraft and act as a corrective to the familiar perception of the era as one of ignorant superstition and wilful persecution. However, Scot unwittingly provides us with a template for today’s vision of the witch as pantomime villain when he notes: ‘One sort of such are said to be witches are women which be commonly old, lame, blear-eyed, pale, foul, and full of wrinkles; poor, sullen, superstitious… lean and deformed… doting [senile] scolds.’ Of course, the reason witches were invariably identified as elderly women was
not because of a long life devoted to the attainment of the black arts, but simply because such women were economically and socially the most vulnerable members of society, and such figures, especially those reduced to begging for their survival, were regarded, then as now, with suspicion and resentment.24

According to Peter Ackroyd, London has its own tradition of witchcraft, and he cites the examples of Old Mother Red Cap and Old Mother Black Cap as well as the notorious seventeenth-century healer and fortune teller, Mother Damnable, whose cottage supposedly occupied the site of today’s Camden Town underground station.25 But perhaps the most well-documented instance of witchcraft to have occurred in Elizabethan London was the Mary Glover case of 1602, the subject of Edward Jorden’s Briefe Discourse of the Disease Called the Suffocation of the Mother, published the following year, and subsequently to become a key text in the medical opposition to superstition and a pioneering case-study in the treatment of hysteria.26

In April 1602, Mary Glover, the teenage daughter of a London shopkeeper, fell ill following a dispute with an elderly woman called Elizabeth Jackson. The girl had accused Jackson of fraud and she, in return, had confronted Glover and directed toward her a succession of terrifying curses. Some three days later, following a further meeting with Jackson, Glover soon found her throat constricted before being struck dumb and blind. In the following weeks Glover’s condition worsened while Jackson was alleged to have repeated her curses, thanking God that he had heard her prayer and ‘stopped the mouth and tyed the tongue of one of myne enemies’.27 At a time when most Elizabethans believed that such

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curses could prove deadly, Jackson’s threats were foolhardy in the extreme and had soon aroused the suspicion of witchcraft. As Glover’s symptoms became more pronounced, involving ‘unconsciousness, swellings, contortions, writhings and an elaborately choreographed pattern of hand motions’, many of her observers began, in the absence of any clear medical explanation, to seek a supernatural cause.28 Glover herself was under no such confusion as to the origins of her malady and, having been brought face to face with Jackson by her uncle who, usefully, was an alderman and former sheriff, she immediately fell into a fit and was heard to repeat the words ‘hang her, hang her’ in a nasal voice.29 The case against Jackson was mounting but, thankfully, not everyone was so easily convinced and the then Bishop of London, Richard Bancroft, believed her to be innocent. At his behest, Glover was subjected to a number of tests to establish the validity of her claim to be possessed. Unfortunately for Jackson, Glover’s display of contortions and her resistance to pain (she remained impervious to pin pricks and burning) were impressive enough to bewitch the most ardent sceptic, and Jackson was remanded for trial in December 1602.

The trial was a sensation that split the medical establishment and saw Glover and Jackson subjected to the standard witchcraft tests of the day. Both Glover and Jackson were forced to repeat the Lord’s Prayer and the Creed, but Jackson’s ignorance proved her downfall, for in omitting the verse asking for forgiveness of sins as well as making other errors, she was deemed guilty, while Glover emphasised the point by writhing impressively at opportune moments. In Jackson’s defence, Edward Jorden argued that the girl’s symptoms were merely those of ‘passio hysterica’.30 But, in the ab-
sence of any obvious cure for such a condition, Jorden’s diagnosis was dismissed by the judge, Sir Edmund Anderson, who claimed, ‘The land is full of witches, they abound in all places.’ Indeed, Anderson himself boasted of having hanged more than a dozen witches before reminding the jury that Jackson displayed the stereotypical traits of the witch, those of an ill-tempered, bad-tongued woman. Needless to say, Jackson was found guilty. But, luckily for her, witchcraft that did not result in the victim’s death did not become a capital crime until 1604 and, instead, she received a year’s confinement, the maximum penalty for a first offence under the statute of 1563.

However, Jackson had powerful supporters and she was quickly released from prison, probably on receipt of a royal pardon, while her ‘victim’, Mary Glover, continued to suffer her sporadic fits. Finally, on 14 December of that year, Glover was cured by an act of exorcism administered by a group of Puritan ministers. Through a session of fasting and prayer, these preachers battled for control of Mary’s soul and, after much prolonged struggle and, of course, the now familiar convulsions, the devil was banished and Mary was revived.

The Mary Glover case divided both London and the Church itself, between the Anglican clergy on the one hand who saw the act of exorcism as an idolatrous Catholic ritual, and the more militant Puritan faction which saw the Glover case as evidence of demonic possession. Equally, the London citizenry was divided between those who clung to the superstitious folklore that underpinned their religious beliefs and those who proclaimed a rational outlook and were dismissive of the credulous and gullible. Jorden’s account stands alongside the works of Scot and Gifford in offering a sceptical
counterblast to those who perceived the hand of Satan behind everyday events and the Glover case demonstrates the degree to which particular manifestations of witchcraft were seized upon by Church and state for political gain. Indeed, this case continued to resurface for the rest of the century through a series of publications which sought to promote rival agendas and, as such, is an example of the manipulation of the occult for political ends that continues to this day.

Following the accession of James I to the throne in 1603, the practice of witchcraft began to fall into decline. Despite an earlier enthusiasm for witch-hunting, James soon turned his attentions to exposing false claims of bewitchment and this change of heart was at least partially due to the sceptical counsel of Edward Jorden, who continued, in a semi-official capacity, to promote the medical explanation of witchcraft. As a consequence, the number of witchcraft persecutions during James’s reign began to decrease and, apart from the anomaly of Witchfinder General, Matthew Hopkins, and his period of feverish activity in Essex during the 1640s, the king’s newly sceptical attitude soon became widespread. In this light, the Mary Glover case may be viewed as something of a turning-point in the history of witchcraft as it resulted in a shift in official attitudes towards a sceptical outlook. The practice of exorcism by prayer and fasting was outlawed after the case and the burden of proof in witchcraft trials fell in favour of the defendant as natural causes such as fraud and melancholy were increasingly given the benefit of the doubt. Yet despite this change in mood, it would be wrong simply to equate such a shift with the victory of rationalism over superstition. Rather one should judge this to be as much the result of changes in the cultural and political climate of
seventeenth-century England. For ultimately, as Reginald Scot maintained, occult beliefs are deeply held and, while science may provide alternative explanations, the underlying need to find a victim to blame for one’s misfortunes remains:

The fables of Witchcraft had taken so fast hold and deepe root in the heart of man, that fewe or none can (nowadays) with patience indure the hand and correction of God. For if any adversitie, greefe, sicknesse, loss of children, corne, cattell, or libertie happen unto them; and by and by they exclaime upon witches.34

Notes

5. Peter Ackroyd sees this elision of magic and science as characteristic of the city itself, writing: ‘But in London it is impossible to distinguish magic from other versions of intellectual and mechanical aptitude. Dr Dee, the great Elizabethan magus of Mortlake, for example, was an engineer and a geographer as well as an alchemist.’ Peter Ackroyd, *London*, London: Chatto & Windus, 2000, p. 508.
10. Woolley, p. 325.
11. For a summary of Dee’s life in fiction and on film visit http://www.answers.com/topic/john-dee
12. Iain Sinclair, *London Orbital*, London: Granta, 2002, p. 222. The precise site of Dee’s grave has long since been lost, but he receives an epitaph of sorts in the block of council homes that form John Dee House, next to St Mary’s Church in Mortlake. Dee appears repeatedly in Sinclair’s work and, in his *Liquid City*, Sinclair recalls a walk conducted with Alan Moore to St Mary’s Churchyard which he describes as ‘a marriage of convenience between chiropody and alchemy’, adding ‘we were thrift-shop Dee and Kelly cupping our ears for whispers from tired stone’. See Iain Sinclair & Marc Atkins, *Liquid City*, London: Reaktion, 1999, p. 83–5.
13. See Manchester Area Psychogeographic #8, Summer, 1997 at http://map.twentythree.us/dee.html
18. Writing about Lambeth and its occult history, Peter Ackroyd notes: ‘By chance, or coincidence, many astrologers came to inhabit Lambeth. The name itself, however, may have drawn them. Beth-el was in Hebrew the
name for a sacred place, here fortuitously connected with the Lamb of God.’ Ackroyd adds that Forman would have been joined in Lambeth by his contemporary and astro-
logical rival, Captain Bubb, as well as by Francis Moore, the astrologer and author of Moore’s Almanac and the anti-

21. Salgado writes: ‘Between 1558, when Elizabeth I came to the throne and 1736, when witchcraft ceased to be a statutory offence in England, some 513 charges of witch-
craft were examined in the Courts of the Home Circuit, which comprised Essex, Hertfordshire, Kent, Surrey and Sussex. There were 200 convictions and 109 persons were hanged. This is very different in scale from the 900 reported to have been burned at the stake in Lorrain between 1580 and 1595 and the 1,000 at Como in the single year 1524.’ Salgado, p. 87.
22. Picard, p. 278.
23. Reginald Scot, Discoverie of Witchcraft, qtd. in Picard, p. 278.
26. For a full account of this case, including a facsimile of Jorden’s original text, see Michael MacDonald, ed., Witchcraft and Hysteria in Elizabethan London: Edward Jorden

27. MacDonald, p xi.
28. MacDonald, p. xii.
29. MacDonald, p. xiii.
30. MacDonald, p. xvii.
31. MacDonald, p. xviii.
32. MacDonald, p. xvi.
33. MacDonald, p. lii.
34. Reginald Scot, Discoverie of Witchcraft (1584), ed. by Hugh Ross Williamson, Carbondale, Ill., 1964, p. 25, qtd. in MacDonald, p. xlii.
London in the late eighteenth century was awash with mystics, mythmakers, gurus, prophets, seers and false messiahs. Prayer houses resounded to unusual readings of the Old and New Testaments. Meeting halls witnessed fresh insights into the mystical body of work known as the Hermetica… Occupants of suburban villas debated the finer points of the Kabbalah… Bookshops sold works explaining such age-old alchemical mysteries as the Ever-burning Lights of Trithemius.

Ed Glinert, *East End Chronicles*¹

Almost as soon as the embers had died down following the Great Fire of 1666, plans were produced to rebuild the burnt-out city. To the ambitious men of the Royal Society, formed in 1648 to promote the New Science of mathematics and engineering, the devastation wrought by the fire heralded the opportunity to build the city anew, a city of clean lines and geometric precision: the New Jerusalem.

On 8 February 1667, Christopher Wren was appointed by Charles II as Surveyor General and principal architect of this rebuilding project and along with his colleagues Robert Hooke, John Evelyn and the Danish architect Caius Gabriel Cibber, Wren developed a grid system that would replace the
disorder of the medieval city with its maze-like warren of close-packed dwellings. With the north mostly given over to farmland, the west prohibitively expensive and the south largely swampland, the plan was to develop eastwards, with spacious boulevards radiating outwards from the centre of the refashioned St Paul’s. Superficially, at least, the model presented by Wren conforms to a straightforward vision of scientific reason, the final victory of Renaissance logic over the superstitions of an earlier age. But, as Ed Glinert has indicated, such a perception overlooks those earlier traditions in which such systematic thinking was based. For the rational outlook espoused by Wren was rooted less in the prevailing fashion for empirical science than in the unacknowledged traditions of Freemasonry, the Cabbala and the ‘sacred measurements’ of the Bible. For this New Jerusalem, the capital of the Christian world, free from Papist rule, would be measured in accordance with principles laid down in the Old Testament Book of Numbers: ‘Ye shall measure from without the city on the east side two thousand cubits, and on the south side two thousand cubits, and on the west side two thousand cubits, and on the north side two thousand cubits, and the city shall be in the midst.’

A cubit, about two-thirds of a mile, represents the distance between Jerusalem and the Mount of Olives and, as such, is the furthest that a Jew may travel during the Sabbath. The importance of this measurement was reflected in its use by earlier London builders who had employed the distance both for the western boundary of the city, Temple Bar, which lies 2,000 cubits from the western end of St Paul’s, and the eastern boundary, St Dunstan in the East, which is also 2,000 cubits from the eastern end of the cathedral. The apex of
this design lies a further 2,000 cubits east, where one of London’s most historically significant occult locations, Wellclose Square, was built. But Wren’s grandiose plans for the city’s redevelopment soon became mired in a quagmire of bureaucracy and spiralling costs and were never completed.

Today, however, historians tend to overlook, or wilfully obscure, the occult design that underpins Wren’s vision of the New Jerusalem, and he is routinely cited as a historical example of the ascendancy of empirical reason. Surprisingly, it has instead been the fate of Wren’s sometime pupil and assistant, Nicholas Hawksmoor, to be identified as the ‘Devil’s architect’. And it is through his work in the early years of the eighteenth century, and subsequently through a curious blend of fact and fiction, that a parallel history of London begins to emerge.

Nicholas Hawksmoor (1661–1736) and the Rebuilding of London

Born to a humble family in Nottinghamshire in 1661, the occult reputation that Nicholas Hawksmoor enjoys today has been acquired almost entirely retrospectively. A professional architect in a world dominated almost exclusively by amateurs, his career marks the middle link between his more celebrated contemporaries, Vanbrugh and Wren. These three form the trio of Britain’s great Baroque architects and between them they transformed the topography of London.

According to the Hawksmoor scholar, Kerry Downes, his career was largely that of a ‘back-room boy’. First a pupil, then an assistant, and finally, perhaps, the partner of
Christopher Wren, it wasn’t until the early years of the eighteenth century that he was to produce the buildings for which he is now remembered. Between 1684 and 1700 Hawksmoor collaborated with Wren on a number of works in London, including Chelsea Hospital, St Paul’s Cathedral, Hampton Court Palace and Greenwich Hospital, and it was thanks to Wren’s influence that Hawksmoor was named Clerk of the Works at Kensington Palace in 1689. In 1705, he was to become Deputy Surveyor of Works at Greenwich, but it was only later that he was to be commissioned to design the London churches on which his future reputation was to rest.

In 1711, aged 50 and gout-ridden, Hawksmoor was appointed as one of the two surveyors to the commission established to enact Queen Anne’s Fifty New Churches Act. Of these fifty churches, only twelve were built, six of which were designed solely by Hawksmoor, while a further two were constructed in collaboration with John James. From the outset, Hawksmoor’s designs conformed to Vanbrugh’s emphasis upon ‘the most solemn and Awfull Appearance both without and within’.6 Hawksmoor’s churches are all planned around intersecting axes and are based upon straight lines and rectangles and he himself described his art as grounded in the ‘rules of the Ancients’, a blend of ‘Strong Reason and good fancy, joyn’d with experience and tryalls, so that we are assured of the good effect of it’.7 Unlike many of his contemporaries, Hawksmoor never took the Grand Tour, and yet his tutelage under Wren appears to have instilled in him a great passion for the architecture of antiquity, particularly all forms of religious architecture, from ancient Egypt to Greece and Rome, to Islamic mosques and even to the English Gothic.

These influences are most apparent in St George’s,
Bloomsbury, a church that was positioned on Bloomsbury Way to cater for both its wealthier congregation to the north and, more optimistically, the residents of the notorious slum, or Rookery, of St Giles in the south. Shoehorned into position within an existing street, Hawksmoor’s innovative design allowed for the customary Christian east-west orientation (which was later to be realigned to make more room) but contains a nave which is shaped as a perfect cube in an allusion to the Temple of Solomon in Jerusalem. Most striking, however, is the extraordinary tower above the church, a pyramid topped by a statue of George I dressed as a Roman and adorned with pairs of lions and unicorns around its base. These animals are a new addition, but the pyramid itself was modelled by Hawksmoor upon descriptions of the Mausoleum at Halicarnassus, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. And while it is tempting to see this as clear evidence of Hawksmoor’s occult preoccupations, the reality is that it was more likely the result of his lifelong fascination with the architecture of antiquity.

By December 1715, Hawksmoor had four of his own designs under construction and, by the time that the commission was wound up in 1733, he had produced a further two churches as well as the two collaborations with John James. In addition, before his death in 1736, Hawksmoor had completed his work on the west towers of Westminster Abbey.

Today, despite a combination of significant war damage, unsympathetic renovation and prolonged periods of neglect, his six London churches remain. They are:

St Alfrege, Greenwich (1712–1718)
St George-in-the-East, Wapping (1714–1729)
St Anne, Limehouse (1714–1730)
Christ Church, Spitalfields (1714–1729)
St Mary Woolnoth, the City (1716–1724)
St George, Bloomsbury (1716–1731)

In 2004, after many years of work, Christ Church, Spitalfields was reopened. St George’s, Bloomsbury, also the subject of extensive restoration, has reopened recently. His two collaborations with John James, however, have fared less well: St John, Horsleydown was gutted during the war and later demolished. In the 1970s, the offices of the London City Mission were built upon its foundations off the Tower Bridge Road. Hawksmoor’s distinctive obelisk remains above St Luke’s, Old Street, which was also bombed during the war. It has been renovated and now acts as a rehearsal space for the London Symphony Orchestra.

Like Wren, the positioning of Hawksmoor’s churches is systematic rather than arbitrary and his own churches conform to the same sacred measurements: ‘St George’s-in-the-East stands 2,000 cubits from the Roman wall, Christ Church Spitalfields 2,000 cubits from Wellclose Square, and St Mary Woolnoth (by modern-day Bank tube station) 2,000 cubits from Christ Church.’ 8 Indeed, it is largely as a result of these alignments between his churches that Hawksmoor has acquired a latter-day reputation as an occultist extraordinaire. And the roots of this occult reinterpretation of an architect whose work had fallen almost entirely into neglect 9 can be found in the publication of Iain Sinclair’s seminal work of the London occult, *Lud Heat*, in 1975.

Sinclair’s prose poem begins with ‘Nicholas Hawksmoor, His Churches’. It is here that he proposes an occult alignment
in which Hawksmoor’s London churches are connected by lines of influence, tracing out a suggestive pattern of pentacles and triangulations across the capital:

A triangle is formed between Christ Church, St George-in-the-East and St Anne, Limehouse. These are centres of power for those territories; sentinel, sphinx-form, slack dynamos abandoned as the culture they supported goes into retreat. The power remains latent, the frustration mounts on a current of animal magnetism, and victims are still claimed.

St George, Bloomsbury, and St Alfege, Greenwich, make up the major pentacle-star. The five card is reversed, beggars in snow pass under the lit church window; the judgement is ‘disorder, chaos, ruin, discord, profligacy’. These churches guard or mark, rest upon, two major sources of occult power: The British Museum and Greenwich Observatory…

Then there is the sub-system of fire obelisks: St Luke, Old Street, and St John, Horsleydown. They form an equilateral triangle, raised over the water, with London’s true obelisk – ‘Cleopatra’s Needle,’ which is, of course, the obelisk set up by Thothmes III in front of the Temple of the Sun at Heliopolis.10

In addition, Sinclair links the sites of Hawksmoor’s east London churches to their proximity with two of the most notorious crimes in London history: the Ratcliffe Highway murders of 1811 and those of Jack the Ripper in 1888. In the former, celebrated by de Quincey in his On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts (1827), the unfortunate Marr family,
who lived on the notorious Ratcliffe Highway adjacent to St George-in-the-East, were murdered. The murders of another family, the Williamsons, followed shortly afterwards. The Marrs were interred at St George’s, while their supposed murderer, John Williams, was buried with a stake through his heart at a point to the north of St George’s at the intersection of four roads.\textsuperscript{11} The Whitechapel murders of Jack the Ripper took place against the backdrop of Hawksmoor’s Christchurch, Spitalfields, with Marie Kelly ritualistically murdered in Miller’s Court, Dorset Street, directly opposite the church. Sinclair describes Hawksmoor’s churches as possessing a malignancy so potent that it acts as a magnetic force, ensuring that such crimes are recurrent within the force field generated by Hawksmoor’s malign influence.\textsuperscript{12}

In 1976, the year following the publication of Sinclair’s book, Stephen Knight released his account of the Ripper murders, \textit{Jack the Ripper: the Final Solution}, in which he put forward the theory that the Ripper had in fact been Queen Victoria’s private physician, Sir William Gull, acting as part of a cover-up to conceal the birth of an illegitimate child to Victoria’s grandson, Prince Albert, the Duke of Clarence. Since this time these two books have gradually become conjoined in the public imagination with the result that Hawksmoor’s churches have gained an occult status which was previously wholly absent. This status was confirmed by the success of Peter Ackroyd’s bestselling \textit{Hawksmoor} (1985) in which, acknowledging Sinclair’s lead, Ackroyd gives further credence to the belief that Hawksmoor’s churches map out a malignant mythology of London. But Hawksmoor finds his occult apotheosis in Alan Moore’s bizarre \textit{From Hell} (1991–6). Here, the Ripper murders, freemasonry, Egyptology, mysticism and the

\begin{itemize}
\item 48 \end{itemize}
myths of London’s occult heritage are conflated to form a single great conspiracy enveloping Victorian London. And it is within this impenetrable maze of occult symbolism and concealed meanings that Hawksmoor’s churches have since become enmeshed, a process which, while bypassing the more mundane realities of architectural history, has had the welcome benefit of ensuring these churches a renewed audience, and for the time being at least, a more secure future.

**Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772)**

The greatest occult figure of the eighteenth century, Emanuel Swedenborg was to return repeatedly to London throughout his long life, dying at 26 Great Bath Street, Clerkenwell in 1772. Today, London is home to the Swedenborg Society, which continues to spread his mystical message from its base in Holborn. But it is in Wapping in the East End that one can visit the modest Swedenborg Gardens, in truth little more than a dilapidated playground for the local estate, and a somewhat drab memorial to what was once one of London’s most resonant occult locations.

Swedenborg was born in Stockholm in 1688, the son of a Lutheran bishop, and was educated at Uppsala University. His early years were spent travelling across Europe where he acquired expertise in an astonishingly wide range of disciplines, from astronomy and metallurgy, to watchmaking and bookbinding. As the editor of the first scientific journal in Sweden, Swedenborg gained renown for his inventions, amongst them a submarine, an aeroplane and a slow combustion stove. His theories on the origin of the solar system and his groundbreaking work on the brain resulted in the offer of a profes-
orship in Uppsala but Swedenborg instead chose a post in the mining industry and, in 1716, he was appointed to the position of Assessor Extraordinary of the Board of Mines. Swedenborg’s remarkable proficiency across the scientific spectrum was recorded in an astonishing array of publications and his growing reputation was reflected in the offer of a seat in Sweden’s House of Nobles.

Swedenborg’s first journey to London took place in 1710, where he may have joined a Jacobite Masonic Lodge, and, on a subsequent visit in 1744, he is reputed to have become a member of the Moravians, a secret society led by the eccentric Count Zinzendorf which aimed to unite Christians and Jews through Cabbalism. But it was in April 1745, while in a London inn, that Swedenborg had the moment of epiphany that was to change his life:

I was in London where I had a private dinner rather late in a restaurant... I was hungry and ate with a good appetite. Towards the end of the meal I noticed a kind of blurring in my vision, it grew dark and I saw the floor covered with the nastiest crawling animals, like snakes, frogs, and creatures of that kind. I was amazed, because I was fully conscious and thinking clearly. After a while the prevailing darkness was quickly dispelled, and I saw a man sitting in the corner of the room. Since I was alone, I was quite frightened when he spoke and said, ‘Don’t eat so much.’ Again it grew dark before my eyes, but just as quickly then became clear. And I found myself alone in the room.’

An admonishment to eat less, even when given by a ghostly figure, would, in itself, seem an inadequate basis with which
to embark on a life of mysticism. But, thankfully for Swedenborg and his future followers, this figure was to reappear shortly after Swedenborg returned home, this time revealing himself to be the Lord God and explaining that he had chosen Swedenborg to expound the spiritual content of the scriptures for the sake of mankind. The rest, as they say, is history. For, from this point on, Swedenborg was to devote himself to religious questions, embarking upon a meticulous study of the Bible and publishing a prolific series of theological works at his own expense, on subjects as diverse as the truth of the afterlife and the secrets of a happy marriage.

Since the 1720s, Swedenborg had spent much of his time in London where the free press allowed him to publish many of his more controversial works without the threat of censorship. At this time, Wapping was the centre of the Scandinavian community and the point of embarkation for many of the Swedish seamen whose ships, with their cargo of timber, were too large to pass under Tower Bridge. As the Swedish community grew, so did the Swedish church take on a more significant role and the first Swedish Church in Britain, the Ulrika Leonora church, was to open in 1728 in Prince’s Square. Swedenborg was a regular worshipper at the new church, which was close to Wellclose Square, where he was to move in 1766. Once an exclusive estate, Wellclose Square now contained two pubs, and it was at the King’s Arms, run by a Swede named Erik Bergstrom, that Swedenborg was to stay. Based upon Bergstrom’s record, Ed Glinert has described Swedenborg’s typical day: ‘the polymath dressed in velvet, breakfasted on coffee, took a daily morning walk, lunched moderately with one or two glasses
of wine, never ate supper, retired early... He was kind, generous and always agreeable, but somewhat reserved.'\(^{15}\) One of Swedenborg’s neighbours in Wellclose Square was the notorious cabbalist, Rabbi Falk, and it is known that these two men met to discuss their occult preoccupations, amongst them ‘Cabbalist sexual techniques that could produce a prolonged erection and state of orgasmic trance’ and how ‘in the spirit world the soul hallucinates a spiritual body to enjoy more wonderful sensations than it experiences on earth’.\(^{16}\) Elsewhere, Gary Lachman has argued that Swedenborg’s most influential occult idea was that of ‘correspondences’, subsequently a central idea in both magical thought and symbolist poetry. Swedenborg claimed that the physical world is rooted in a higher, spiritual world and that correspondences exist between the two. In the alchemical tradition of, ‘as above, so below’, correspondences embody the notion that man contains the entire cosmos within himself; man made truly in the image of the divine.\(^{17}\)

Having predicted accurately the time of his death, Swedenborg duly died on 29 March 1772 at the age of 84 and was buried in the Swedish church in Prince’s Square. In 1787, in accordance with Swedenborg’s wishes, the first independent Swedenborgian church was founded, off Great Eastcheap in the City of London, and it was here, in 1789, that the first ‘General Conference of the Church of the New Jerusalem’ was held. Participants included William Blake and his wife, Catherine. Today, Swedenborg’s Church is a thriving international movement which bases its doctrines upon Swedenborg’s claims to have witnessed the Last Judgement and which holds the following tenets:
There is one God, in whom there is a Divine Trinity.
That He is the Lord Jesus Christ.
That a saving faith is to believe in Him.
That evils are to be shunned, because they are of the devil and
from the devil.
That good actions are to be done because they are of God and
from God.
That these are to be done by a man as from himself, but that
it ought to be believed that they are done from the Lord
with Him and by Him.\textsuperscript{18}

But while Swedenborg’s message has prospered, his earthly
remains have fared less well. Swedenborg’s corpse was re-
turned for burial in Uppsala Cathedral in 1908. By this time,
however, Swedenborg’s skull had been removed by a Swedish
sailor hoping to sell it as a relic. Having changed hands several
times, it was later recovered from a second-hand shop in
Wales and returned to London before being lost once again
while on exhibition in a phrenological collection. In a further
mix-up, the wrong skull was returned to Swedenborg’s body,
while in 1978 the genuine skull went on auction at Sotheby’s
in London for £2,500.\textsuperscript{19}

And as for Wellclose Square, what was once a magnificent
Georgian square is now a rather nondescript estate. The
Swedish community in Wapping declined with the loss of the
timber trade in the late nineteenth century, and the Swedish
church was finally demolished in 1921. In 1938, Prince’s
Square was renamed Swedenborg Gardens, but both this and
Wellclose Square were badly damaged in the Blitz and, in the
1960s, the London County Council finished the job, clearing
the area to build a housing estate. In St George’s estate one
can today find the small baptismal font from the Swedish church which was dedicated in 1960 on the 250\textsuperscript{th} anniversary of the Swedish congregation in London, but, in truth, this is a rather neglected monument and there is little here to remind one of the area’s former occult glories.

**Rabbi Falk – ‘The Ba’al Shem of London’**  
(1708–1782)

Since his death, Swedenborg’s reputation has soared, but during his time in London, and specifically while he was resident in Wellclose Square, his occult supremacy would surely have been eclipsed by that of his neighbour, Chayim Samuel Jacob Falk, or as he was better known, Rabbi Falk, the ‘Ba’al Shem of London’.

Falk’s early life is shrouded in mystery, but he was born around 1708, probably in Podolia in today’s Ukraine, or in Fürth, northern Bavaria. Born into a Sephardic Jewish family, Falk was later denounced as a follower of the cabbalist and false Messiah, Shabbethai Zebi, and he is likely to have belonged to one of the sects that arose at this time as a consequence of the Shabbethaian craze. He arrived in London in 1742, having been forced to flee from Westphalia in Germany, where he had been sentenced to be burned alive as a sorcerer. He was to remain in London for the next 40 years.

While the details of Swedenborg’s life and thought can be found in his prolific series of books, Falk’s rather more occluded existence is largely the subject of speculation and conjecture. Some biographical background can be found, however, in his diary, now in the library of the bet ha-midrash of the United Synagogue. In this extraordinary document, a
record of Falk’s dreams can be found alongside catalogues of books and biblical texts, the cabbalistic names of angels and, more prosaically, recipes for making cakes and spiced liqueurs. And, amidst this confusion, the only certainty appears to be that Falk claimed to be a cabalist and that he ‘ pretended to the possession of thaumaturgic powers’. Indeed, Falk was by no means secretive about his own occult abilities and, shortly after his arrival in London, having moved into an apartment on Prescot Street, near the Tower, he set up his workshop on London Bridge: “This he furnished with talismans, candles and plates of gold. He inscribed on the floor the Seal of Solomon (better known as the Jewish emblem, the Star of David) which he anointed with alum, raisins, dates, cedar and lignum aloes, and mounted on the wall a deer’s head containing holy names to ward off fires.”

In his laboratory, Falk’s alchemical work was conducted alongside more pleasurable experiments, such as the development of a respiratory technique that could induce an orgasmic trance. For Falk was no amateur, but rather a Ba’al Shem, a designation applied to certain masters of the Cabbala who could supposedly perform miracles through their knowledge of the secret names of God. For good measure, he was also an alchemist who had allegedly mastered the art of transforming base metals into gold, as well as a high-ranking Freemason. Not surprisingly, with skills such as these, Falk rapidly gained fame for his exploits, of which we have the following account:

He caused a small taper to burn for many weeks. When he required coals, he had but to utter a cabbalistic incantation, and the lumps glided obediently into his cellar. Plate, • 55 •
which he had left as a pledge at a pawnbroker, found their way to his chest in defiance of the laws of nature. When a fire threatened to destroy the Great Synagogue, he is said to have arrested the progress of the flames by writing four Hebrew letters on the pillars of the door.25

In another story it is claimed that on a journey through Whitechapel the back wheel of his coach fell off, but Falk ordered his coachman to continue and the wheel followed them for the rest of the journey.26 Elsewhere, a contemporary of Falk’s, one Sussman Shesnowzi, describes how, on one occasion, Falk remained in seclusion in his house for six weeks without meat or drink. Finally, having been summoned to enter, ten witnesses were greeted with the sight of Falk ‘seated on a throne, his head diademed with a golden turban, a golden chain round his neck with a pendent silver star on which sacred names were inscribed’.27 Clearly impressed, Shesnowzi proclaims: ‘Verily this man stands alone in his generation by reason of his knowledge of holy mysteries. I cannot recount to you all the wonders he accomplishes. I am grateful in that I have been found worthy to be received among those who dwell within the shadow of his wisdom.’ But beyond these fantastical tales, what really aroused the attention of London’s Jewish community was the claim that Falk was using his laboratory to create a Golem.

The Golem has its roots in Jewish folklore where it is an artificial being created from inanimate matter and the name appears to derive from the word *gelem*, meaning ‘raw material’. The earliest stories of Golems date to early Judaism and, in the Talmud, Adam is described initially as ‘kneaded into a shapeless hunk’, all Golems being created from clay.
The Golem is created without the ability to speak, for it is said that if a Golem were made to speak it would acquire a soul, something which only God can bestow. This act of creation is the result of a cabbalist ritual in which the Golem is activated once one of the secret names of God has been inscribed on its forehead and on a piece of paper slipped under its tongue. For example, the writing of the Hebrew word Emet, or ‘truth’, could animate the Golem, while the erasure of the first letter to form Met, the Hebrew for ‘dead’, would deactivate it. Hebrew legend abounds with tales of Golems, the best-known being that of Rabbi Loew in sixteenth-century Prague who summoned a Golem to defend the ghetto against anti-semitic attack. And, while Rabbi Falk’s attempts ended in failure, the allure of this particular legend lives on, particularly in literature and film where it has formed its own sub-genre, inspiring, amongst others, Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein (1818).

Having arrived in London with nothing, Falk soon applied his talents to the acquisition of a fortune, and successful speculation, as well as pawnbroking, soon provided him with considerable wealth. Indeed, Falk’s principal friends were the London bankers, Aaron Goldsmid and his son, and because he left large sums to charity, the overseers of the United Synagogue in London still distribute annually payments left by him for the poor. With his newfound wealth, Falk moved to the smartest address in east London, Wellclose Square, a site positioned by Wren and the Royal Society after the Fire of London according to Masonic measurements, and intended to form the crown of his New Jerusalem. Here, Falk established his own synagogue in which to practise his cabbalist rituals and it was from here that his fame soon spread. Soon,
Falk was being visited by the most famous people of his day, amongst them Casanova, inquiring into cabbalist sexual techniques, the occultist Cagliostro, and the German aristocrat Theodor von Neuhoff. Neuhoff commissioned Falk to conduct a series of alchemical experiments, hoping to finance a military campaign in Corsica, and it was on Neuhoff’s invitation that Falk travelled to his country retreat at Upton in Essex, on the edge of Epping Forest, where Falk is said to have stored for safe keeping much of the treasure he had accumulated from grateful clients.

Falk died on 17 April 1782 and was buried in the Alderney Road cemetery in east London. His epitaph reads: ‘Here is interred an aged and honourable man, a great personage who came from the east, an accomplished Sage, an adept in Kabbalah. His name was known to the ends of the earth and distant isles.’ Soon, however, his name was blackened as his detractors sought to blame him for the death of Elias Levy. Levy, the previous owner of Falk’s home in Wellclose Square, was a member of the Great Synagogue congregation and had banned its members from attending Falk’s private sessions, punishing one such transgressor by forcing him to stand throughout an afternoon’s service in the synagogue, repeating an admission of his guilt. Falk, in response, is said to have laid a cabbalistic curse upon Levy, who died a few months later, despite being in good heath and in his early fifties.

Most Londoners, however, were less interested in the fate of Levy, than in the whereabouts of Falk’s treasure trove in Epping Forest. Within years of his death, this fabled hoard had grown to include the authentic Great Seal of England, thrown into the Thames by James II in 1688, the single signed copy of Robert Fludd’s History of the Macrocosm and the
Microcosm, as well as Titian’s Portrait of Isabella d’Este in Red, lost following the execution of Charles I in 1649. Needless to say, despite extensive searches of Epping Forest, the whereabouts of Rabbi Falk’s treasure remains a mystery to this day.

William Blake (1757–1827) and the New Jerusalem

It is often believed that Blake was a perpetual exile from the life of the late 18th century, a lonely and innovative rebel who formed no relationship with his contemporaries. But this is not the case. In his beliefs he was part of a group of Londoners — many of them printers and engravers as he was — who extolled the significance of esoteric knowledge. Some practiced mesmerism or sexual magic, some were Freemasons or Jacobites, some were cabbalists or occultists, but all believed in the primacy of the spiritual world. Theirs was a London faith, a devotion springing from the poverty and darkness of the city.

Peter Ackroyd, ‘The London that became Jerusalem’

‘Blake was first and last a Londoner’, writes Kathleen Raine, and apart from a short sojourn in Felpham in Sussex, Blake lived his entire life within the city that was to provide his imaginative landscape. Born in Soho at 28 Broad Street on 29 November 1757, Blake was to inhabit various quarters of the city before his death at Fountain Court, off the Strand, in 1827. As an apprentice, he lived at 31 Great Queen Street, off Kingsway, opposite the Freemasons’ Hall. Later, he was to enroll as a student at the Royal Academy Schools, today in Piccadilly, in Blake’s lifetime upon the Strand, and later in
Somerset House. Following his marriage in 1782 to Catherine Boucher from Battersea, Blake and his wife moved to Green Street by Leicester Fields, now Leicester Square. Now obliged to earn a living, Blake set up a printing business, returning to his birthplace and setting up shop next door at 27 Broad Street, before later moving nearby to 28 Poland Street, today the site of a hairdressing salon. In 1790, in search of larger premises, Blake made what was, by his standards, an epic move across the river to 13 Hercules Buildings, Lambeth, where he and his wife were to remain for the next ten years. Here, amidst a community of like-minded political radicals, Blake was to complete many of the works on which his fame now rests. By the time he left Lambeth in 1800, for Felpham, the area was becoming little more than a slum, and yet these years were amongst the happiest of Blake’s life. ‘From Lambeth / We began our Foundations; Lovely Lambeth!’ he exclaims. On their return to London in 1803, Blake and his wife, now considerably poorer than before their departure, rented rooms at 17 South Molton Street, south of Oxford Street. They were to remain here for the next 17 years.

I behold London; a Human awful wonder of God! He says: return, Albion, return! I give myself for thee: My streets are my, Ideas of Imagination… I write in South Molton Street, what I both see and hear In regions of Humanity, in Londons opening streets. I see thee awful Parent Land in light, behold I see. (from Jerusalem)

Finally, then, to 3 Fountains Court, today a small alley off the
Strand, where Blake was to die, singing, on 12 August 1827. He was buried in Bunhill Fields, near Old Street, in an unmarked grave, alongside his fellow Dissenters, Daniel Defoe and John Bunyan.

Blake inaugurates the tradition of the London Visionary, in which a political radicalism that challenges the harsh realities of everyday life in the city, is tempered by an awareness of, and access to, that enchanted realm that lies behind this, often grim, exterior. This visionary capacity is a transformative experience, offsetting that which is, against that which might be, Heaven or Hell, London or Jerusalem. And this twofold vision of ‘infinite London’ is best reflected in the contrast between Blake’s poem London, from his Songs of Experience, and his later epic, Jerusalem.

In the former, London can be seen as a city ripe for radical uprising, as Continental revolutionary enthusiasm is voiced upon the streets of London. This is a city of corruption and inequality in which Blake wanders through the city streets, alert to the unchanging symbols of human suffering:

I wander thro’ each charter’d street,
Near where the charter’d Thames does flow
And mark in every face I meet
Marks of weakness, marks of woe

In every cry of every Man,
In every Infants cry of fear,
In every voice: in every ban,
The mind-forg’d manacles I hear
(from London)
This is the record of the urban wanderer whose descriptions of eighteenth-century street life are overlaid by an intensely individualistic vision to create a new topography of the city. For Blake was to transform the familiar landscapes of his own day into a transcendent image of ‘the spiritual Four-fold London eternal’, a London imaginatively reconstituted to form the New Jerusalem:

The fields from Islington to Marybone,
To Primrose Hill and Saint John’s Wood:
Were builded over with pillars of gold,
And there Jerusalem’s pillars stood.35
(from Jerusalem)

Here, Blake provides the coordinates of his New Jerusalem and, at first glance, these appear to present an uncannily accurate prediction of the most sought-after enclaves of London’s future prosperity. But what is so distinctive about Blake’s vision is his ability to foreground the image of Jerusalem within the realities of his everyday experience. Thus Blake’s visionary city is not transported to some ethereal realm but rather is sited amidst a familiar topography. So, in confirmation of the historical antecedents to today’s North/South divide, Jerusalem is to be constructed in the north of the city, while the satanic mills of heavy industry are deposited south of the river in Lambeth:

And did the Countenance Divine
Shine forth upon our clouded hills?
And was Jerusalem builded here
Among these dark Satanic mills?
(from Jerusalem)
These dark Satanic mills are emblematic of Blake’s intermingling of the eternal and the local. For while Blake lived in Lambeth, the Albion Mill actually operated on Blackfriars Bridge, until it was burnt down by arsonists in 1791. This was London’s first great factory, designed to run upon huge steam engines and supposed to produce some 6,000 bushels of flour a week. It remained a blackened shell until 1809 and Blake would no doubt have passed it every day as he walked into the City.36

Ultimately, Blake’s radicalism, his occult preoccupations, and his reliance upon earlier spiritual traditions are all aspects of his attempt to challenge the dominant systematic modes of thought espoused by Newton. For Blake sought out alternative sources of power, a counter-magic with which to confront that wielded by the political and economic rulers of his day, and he found these spiritual resources in the chaotic, irrational and irrepressible forces of his native city. London is, then, both a city of darkness, a satanic site of squalor, misery and unceasing industry, but equally the site of the New Jerusalem, whose streets can be walked by those visionaries able to ascertain the way.

Blake is often, and wrongly, dismissed as an instinctive genius, who stands outside any occult tradition.37 In reality, however, Blake was well versed in a wide range of unorthodox beliefs, as one might expect, growing up in a family of dissenters. Indeed, alongside his interest in Swedenborg’s ideas, Blake was exposed to a wide range of occult influences, from the stage magician De Loutherberg and the ‘magical’ artist Richard Cosway, to the practising astrologer and ‘zodiacal physiognomist’, John Varley. Later in life, having demonstrated his rejection of Swedenborgian beliefs in _The Marriage_
of Heaven and Hell, Blake was to turn to the teachings of Paracelsus and Jacob Boehme, who were to confirm his belief in the primacy of natural instincts over and against the orthodoxies of systematic reason. In addition, Blake was to be influenced by the neoplatonic thought of Thomas Taylor, who was to introduce him to the concept of the *prisca sapientia*, or ‘primal wisdom’, a tradition couched in mathematical and geometric forms, which was said to have had adherents first in Orpheus, Hermes and Zoroaster and, later, Plato, Plotinus and Proclus.  

Kathleen Raine has argued that Blake belongs within a hermetic tradition of ancient occult knowledge, while Gary Lachman sees Blake’s importance as stemming from his position on ‘the threshold of the radical split between the scientific and hermetic worldviews that ushered in the nineteenth century’.  

It should be remembered, however, that Blake remained almost entirely overlooked during his own lifetime, only coming to prominence at the end of the nineteenth century, largely through the efforts of WBYeats. And, as a consequence, Blake remains in the curious, if not paradoxical, position of having both acted as a forerunner to Romanticism, and reignited interest in a movement that was, by the time of his rediscovery, almost burned out.

Blake’s contribution to London’s occult traditions, while neglected in his own lifetime, are today more relevant than ever. For, as an urban walker who remakes the city as he passes through it, as well as a political radical who challenges the power structures of his day, Blake is seen by many to be a prototype psychogeographer. Indeed, Iain Sinclair describes him as the ‘Godfather of all psychogeographers’, and in many ways Blake’s occult and antiquarian preoccupations are mir-
rored in our newfound obsession with London’s arcane and obscure history. Indeed, Peter Ackroyd goes even further, arguing that it is only now, some 250 years after his death, that we are finally beginning to understand his message and to recognise him as ‘the great prophet of our technological age’. ‘I do believe’, states Ackroyd, ‘that he will become the great prophet of the next millennium’.

Notes

9. The neglect of Hawksmoor’s remaining London churches was such that in 1962 the Hawksmoor Committee was established by a group of enthusiasts to publicise the plight of his work. This committee successfully secured the cooperation of the Arts Council in mounting an exhibition of drawings, models and photographs, and it was from this point that his reputation began to recover. See Downes, p. 7.
11. For the definitive account of the Ratcliffe Highway mur-

12. Alongside the Ratcliffe Highway and Ripper murders, Sinclair also notes the murder of Abraham Cohen in 1974 on the Cannon Street Road. Cohen was found with three coins laid ritualistically at his feet, as they had been at the murder of the first Ripper victim, Mary Ann Nichols in 1888. See Sinclair, *Lud Heat*, p. 21.

13. Lachman, p. 17.


17. Lachman, p. 18.


24. According to Ed Glinert, ‘These were the names with which God had created the world, according to Kabbalist lore. Names which in biblical times the High Priest in the Temple of Solomon uttered during prayers, but which were always drowned out by blasts on the ram’s horn so that the congregation would not be able to hear them. Since the destruction of the Jew’s last temple in AD 70 the names had been lost to all but the cognoscenti. However, their powers remained undimmed. If they were used correctly wonders magnificent to behold

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would result; if inappropriately, horrific display of divine wrath would ensue.’ Glinert, *East End*, p. 72.

25. Adler, p. 5.
27. Adler, p. 5.

28. Interestingly, the figure of the golem also intersects with the history of Dr Dee: Gustav Meyrink, the author of the classic novel *The Golem* (1915) was also to write a novel exploring Dr Dee’s time in Prague, entitled *The Angel of the West Window* (1927). Dee attempts to create a golem himself in Peter Ackroyd’s *The House of Doctor Dee* (1993). While the following year, the golem returns to haunt the streets of Victorian London in Ackroyd’s *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* (1994). For a comprehensive list of examples of the golem in film and literature visit http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Golem_in_popular_culture

35. The poet, Aidan Andrew Dun, author of *Vale Royal* (1995), has described these lines as Blake’s ‘Golden Quatrain’, arguing that they reveal the area around King’s Cross to be the centre of the New Jerusalem: ‘These four lines demarcate a geographical rectangle, with the Euston Road to the south forming its base, the line from

**THE CAPITOL OF DARKNESSE**
Marylebone to Primrose Hill as its western side. St Pancras Old Church lies at the centre of this rectangle.’

37. Lachman, p. 57.
38. Lachman, p. 60.
39. Lachman, p. 56.
40. Lachman, p. 57.
The twenty-four years between 1890 and the beginning of World War I saw a remarkable eruption of creative energy and speculation, a fantastic mélange of alternative and progressive ideas wedding ancient beliefs and modern science. Central to this ideological flood was the occult, elements of which reached from the dim, primeval past to the unimagined future... Yoga, meditation, vegetarianism; multiculturalism, homeopathy, and higher consciousness; visions of an alternative society, anti-capitalism, and an interest in primitive beliefs; a fascination with ancient stone monuments, religious cults, and communes; progressive education, free love, feminism, and openness to homosexuality and lesbianism; experimentation with drugs, a rejection of cold reason in favour of feeling and intuition, paganism and nature worship; a turning away from modernity and progress as well as a feverish millennialism: in the years leading up to World War I these and other ingredients combined to produce an effervescent, highly charged atmosphere in which anything seemed possible and in which the new century just dawning seemed a blank slate on which mankind could now write its own destiny.

Gary Lachman, *The Dedalus Book of the Occult*
From the standpoint of the early twenty-first century, amidst an era of apparent social upheaval and uncertainty, the Victorian age is often seen as a period of reassuring stability, a time of industriousness and piety underwritten by a steadfast belief in God, the Nation and the family. The reality, of course, was somewhat different, and what is now fondly recalled as a time of religious and social cohesion was, in fact, one of intellectual ferment and irrational revival. For throughout the nineteenth century, the accepted dogmas of established religion were under attack from an irresistible alliance of emerging ideologies and beliefs. From the Marxist assault on social organisation to Darwinian evolutionary theories, from the rise of Scientism to the logicians’ dismissal of faith, organised religion was on the retreat and, in its place, arose a host of occult alternatives, from spiritualism and Theosophy to mysticism and the paranormal. Just as it appeared that society was harvesting the benefits of industrial progress, the Enlightenment rationalism that had produced these achievements was now under threat from this emerging tide of irrational beliefs.

At the forefront of this challenge to the old orthodoxies were those societies that were formed towards the end of the century, as millennial anxieties and newborn pseudo-sciences gave birth to the fin de Siècle, an unprecedented flowering of occult activity that continued until the outbreak of the First World War. In London, such activities were governed largely by the opposing doctrines of two esoteric organizations, whose occult influence was to dominate the cultural life of the city. The Theosophical Society was formed in New York in 1875, but its co-founder and guiding light, Madame Blavatsky, spent her final years living in London where she died in 1891.
Her idiosyncratic brew of esoteric beliefs was enormously influential in the development of what would today be described as New Age ideas. Many of the occult philosophies that gained widespread currency in late Victorian London were, in fact, attempts to revive and reconnect with earlier occult traditions that had been largely overlooked since the Enlightenment. Thus disciplines such as astrology, alchemy and magic, or what might loosely be termed the hermetic sciences, regained a measure of popular support in the final years of the century, most notably through the activities of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, formed in 1888. By the following decade, the membership of the Golden Dawn seemed to include almost the entire London demi-monde of artists and writers, most notable amongst them WB Yeats, Arthur Machen and Aleister Crowley.

But alongside these newfound organisations, whose roots often lay in philosophies exported from the Continent and the Far East, London continued, throughout the Victorian era, to generate its own homegrown network of local superstitions, legends and beliefs. Yet, as the industrial age took hold and, with it, the development of the mass media, traditional folklore began to give way to myths and legends whose very existence was dependent upon the coverage they received in the popular press. Thus was the urban legend born and, in Victorian London, one such legend came into being which persists to this day.

Spring-Heeled Jack (1837–1904)

With its sensational storyline and attendant press-generated hysteria, the story of Spring-Heeled Jack perfectly encapsu-
lates the transition from traditional folklore to urban legend. Spring-Heeled Jack has since become firmly established within the popular imagination as a symbol of Victorian London, his nocturnal activities both intriguing and terrifying the readers of the penny dreadfuls that shaped his legend. This reputation as the bogeyman of the Victorian city also acts as a more innocuous alternative to the much darker realities of the latter part of Victoria’s reign, in which memories of his episodic appearances were to be overshadowed by the crimes of Jack the Ripper. But for those who were to witness this bizarre apparition, with his glowing eyes and metallic claws, vomiting flame and bounding over walls, Spring-Heeled Jack was an equally demonic figure.

With the first accounts appearing in London in 1837, and the last reported sighting in Liverpool in 1904, the history of Spring-Heeled Jack is almost exactly coterminous with the reign of Queen Victoria herself. But it is out of the initial sightings in London that this urban, or rather suburban, legend was born. The first of these took place one evening in September 1837 on Barnes Common, in south-west London. It was here that a businessman, taking a short cut home, witnessed a figure propel himself high over the railings of the adjoining cemetery before bounding away into the darkness. This figure was said to be a man with devilish features, including a pointed nose and ears, and glowing eyes.

Later, in October 1837, a young servant girl named Mary Stevens was on her way home to her employer’s house on Lavender Hill. As she passed Cut-Throat Lane, off Clapham Common, a tall figure grabbed her in a tight embrace and began to kiss her face while ripping at her clothes with claws ‘cold and clammy as those of a corpse’. He ran off when she
screamed, but was seen again on the following night, when he was said to have jumped in front of a coach and horses before leaping over a nine-foot wall and making his escape.

As the rumours spread and the panic increased, so police patrols were set up and rewards offered, but without affect. Initially at least, it was believed that his appearances were simply the result of a prank between ‘foolhardy’ gentlemen. For, on 8 January 1838, the Lord Mayor of London, Sir John Cowan, revealed that he was in receipt of an anonymous letter from one ‘resident of Peckham’, and this was published by The Times the following day:

It appears that some individuals (of, as the writer believes, the highest ranks of life) have laid a wager with a mischievous and foolhardy companion, that he durst not take upon himself the task of visiting many of the villages near London in three different disguises – a ghost, a bear, and a devil… The wager has, however, been accepted, and the unmanly villain has succeeded in depriving seven ladies of their senses, two of whom are not likely to recover… The affair has now been going on for some time, and, strange to say, the papers are still silent on the subject. The writer has reason to believe that they have the whole history at their finger-ends but, through interested motives, are induced to remain silent.²

Soon journalists had christened the figure ‘Spring-Heeled Jack’ and reported sightings escalated with claims that several people had died of fright, while others had suffered fits. As the collective hysteria mounted, events took a more sinister turn and, on 20 February 1838 another young girl was attacked,
this time in Bearbinder Lane in Bow. Here, Jane Alsop opened the door to a man claiming to be a police officer. He asked her for a candle, saying, ‘I’m a policeman. We’ve caught Spring-Heeled Jack in the lane!’ But, on being handed the candle, he vomited blue and white flames into her face and began tearing at her with metallic claws. Alerted by her screams, her sisters managed to wrestle her from his grasp. She later described him to the Lambeth Police Court, claiming, ‘He wore a large helmet, and a sort of tight-fitting costume that felt like oilskin. But the cape was just like the ones worn by policemen. His hands were as cold as ice, and like powerful claws. But the most frightening thing about him was his eyes. They shone like balls of fire.’

On February 28, 18-year-old Lucy Scales and her sister were on their way home from a visit to their brother in Limehouse. At the entrance to Green Dragon Alley, the cloaked figure of Spring-Heeled Jack emerged, once again exhaling a jet of blue flames from his mouth. Lucy collapsed to the ground, seized by violent spasms while Jack jumped over both girls, landing on the roof of a house before disappearing.

These two episodes were widely reported and shortly afterwards one Thomas Millbank was arrested, having boasted in the pub that he was Spring-Heeled Jack. At his trial, however, he was unable to breathe fire, as Jane Alsop had insisted her attacker had, and he was acquitted. Soon Spring-Heeled Jack had achieved such celebrity that his exploits became the subject of endless penny dreadfuls and even plays. But, as his fictional existence flourished, so reports of his appearances diminished. In fact, it appears that Jack had taken early retirement and moved to the provinces, for, apart from a series of sightings in 1843 in Northamptonshire and East Anglia,
there was little sign of him until 1872 when, some 40 years after his debut on Barnes Common, he reappeared in the capital, this time in Peckham. According to the *News of the World*, Peckham was in a state of commotion owing to what had been dubbed ‘the Peckham Ghost’ who was seen leaping over walls with an agility that suggested Jack’s return. Similar sightings followed in Sheffield and, in 1877, he appeared at Aldershot Barracks where a soldier at a sentry post received several slaps to his face with ‘a hand as cold as that of a corpse’. As his comrades rushed to his defence, Jack simply bounded over them and landed behind them grinning. One of the guards, perhaps a little heavy-handedly, took aim and shot him, but without any discernible effect other than to rile him. Jack charged towards them spouting his trademark blue flames before disappearing into the darkness. Sporadic reports later placed Jack in Lincolnshire and, in 1904, it was claimed that he had appeared on the roof of St Francis Xavier’s Church in Liverpool. By now at an advanced age, and no doubt losing some of his famed mobility, he had made, it would appear, his final appearance.

While the latter part of his career suggests the fading fortunes of a vaudeville star forced to take his act around the provinces for diminishing rewards, Spring-Heeled Jack is best remembered in his London heyday, terrorising young servant-girls across the suburban city. And having acquired a parallel fictional existence, Jack underwent something of a rehabilitation in the late nineteenth century, casting off his villainous reputation to re-emerge as a sort of homegrown superman, a Victorian superhero who uses his powers to fight evil. Thus in the 1870s he appears in a penny dreadful (probably written by George A Sala) as a prototype Batman: ‘He
wears a skintight crimson suit, with bat’s wings, a lion’s mane, horns, talons, massive cloven hoofs, and a sulphurous breath; he is immensely strong, and moves in gigantic leaps, thanks to his boots with their hidden springs. 

Like those of all aspiring superheroes, however, the true identity of Spring-Heeled Jack has remained a closely-guarded secret. Naturally enough, the overriding attitude towards his legend has been one of outright scepticism, in which he is dismissed as simply a symptom of mass hysteria, little more than a bogeyman with which to frighten children. Some researchers, however, have concluded that there was in fact a man, or men, behind the myth and, as the anonymous letter received by the Lord Mayor of London in 1838 suggested, this may well have been a group of young aristocrats. Indeed, one rumour, circulating at the time of the first reported sightings, pointed towards an Irish nobleman, the Marquess of Waterford, as the main suspect. This theory appears to have been given credence following an appearance by Jack in Turner Street, off Commercial Road, witnessed by a young boy in the week following the attack on Jane Alsop. The boy later revealed that this figure had both the tell-tale orange eyes and metallic claws attributed to Spring-Heeled Jack, as well as what appeared to be some sort of armour under which a letter W was embroidered in gold. Scant evidence, certainly, but enough to point the finger of suspicion at the ‘Mad Marquess’, who was frequently in the news for his drunken antics, was said to do anything for a wager, and who was also reputed to be something of an athlete. Undermining this particular theory, however, is the fact that the Marquess appears to have been at home in Waterford during the attacks on Jane Alsop and Lucy Scales, while, following his marriage in 1842,
he settled permanently in Ireland, where he apparently lived out an exemplary existence until his death in 1859.

And so the mystery of Spring-Heeled Jack remains unsolved. Yet it appears that this figure refuses to die away. For, in 1986, some 150 years after his first appearance, a travelling salesman in South Herefordshire reportedly had an encounter with a man leaping along the road with enormous, inhuman strides, who slapped his cheek as he passed by. Wearing what was described as a black ski-suit, he was also said to have an elongated chin. Could this possibly be the same man? And, if he is still plying his trade in the provinces, could he one day make a triumphant homecoming to his native city?

Madame Blavatsky (1831–1891) and the Theosophical Society

Arriving in London in the spring of 1887, Madame Blavatsky expected little from her adopted home. ‘What’s the use of asking me to go to London?’ she enquired, ‘What shall I, what can I do amidst your eternal fogs and the emanations of the highest civilization?’ 6 And yet in the few years before her death in 1891, Blavatsky was to electrify the occult community in London, the teachings of the Theosophical Society soon gaining widespread influence and challenging the role of spiritualism as London’s predominant occult movement.

Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (known to her supporters as HPB) was born Helena von Hahn on 31 July 1831 in Ekaterinoslav in the Ukraine. Accounts of her early life are, as seems so common in the life of celebrated occultists, a curious blend of fact and fiction. But what we do know is that she was married in 1848 to the forty-year-old Nikifor Blavatsky,
the Vice-Governor of Erivan. The marriage was an unhappy one and was never consummated. Indeed, according to her account, she was to remain a virgin her entire life, encouraging her followers to abstain altogether from carnal activities which might prove a distraction from the spiritual path. Having left her husband, Blavatsky appears to have embarked on an almost unbelievably picaresque existence, travelling through Europe, Asia and the Americas. During this time, according to her biographer Peter Washington, she claimed ‘to have ridden bareback in a circus, toured Serbia as a concert pianist, opened an ink factory in Odessa, traded as an importer of ostrich feathers in Paris, and worked as an interior decorator to the Empress Eugénie’. In addition, it is claimed that, having survived the wreck of the SS Eumonia and finding herself stranded in Cairo, she began to conduct bogus séances, forming the Société Spirite for occult phenomena. These sessions were fuelled by her lifelong taste for hashish and are said to have ended after complaints were made of fraudulent activities, claims that were to be directed towards her throughout her career. More improbably still, it appears that she managed to find the time to study the occult sciences in Tibet where, under the instruction of ‘Himalayan Masters’, she remained for seven years (this being the traditional period required for apprenticeship in the esoteric arts); Blavatsky’s later celebrity largely rested upon her claim to have been chosen to reach the highest level of initiation in the occult hierarchy permitted to human beings. She also claimed to have become a Buddhist while in Sri Lanka. More easily verified, however, is her emigration to the USA in 1873. And it was in New York that Blavatsky’s occult career blossomed.

Throughout her life, Blavatsky claimed adherence to, and
mastery of, an astonishing array of psychic feats from levitation and clairvoyance to telepathy and mediumship, and it was in New York that she found an audience eager to embrace her skills as an occultist. For, by the 1870s, the Spiritualist craze was on the wane and the public, looking for a new outlet for their occult beliefs, were only too willing to accept Madame Blavatsky’s esoteric blend of Eastern spiritual knowledge and more conventional modern science. Thus, having met Colonel Henry Steel Olcott the previous year, Madame Blavatsky, along with Olcott, William Quan Judge and others, founded the Theosophical Society in September 1875.

The term ‘Theosophy’ translates simply as ‘divine wisdom’ and, from the outset, this ‘wisdom’ was a heady brew of mystical ideas that married the fashion for spiritualism and occult phenomena with eastern metaphysical ideas introduced by Blavatsky. Certainly, much of Theosophy’s appeal lay within the mesmeric character of its chief spokeswoman, Blavatsky herself, but the content of its philosophy was inherently attractive to an audience which, having become disillusioned with the stark materialism of American life, was searching for spiritual guidance. Theosophy satisfied this yearning both by its transcendent message of universal brotherhood and in its appeal to earlier mystical traditions, lost for centuries and now rediscovered. At the heart of Theosophical doctrine, later espoused by Blavatsky in tomes such as Isis Unveiled, was the idea that the evolution of mankind was governed by a chosen elect, a brotherhood of hidden masters who, from their base in the Himalayas, had identified Blavatsky as the person to bring forth this hidden knowledge and share it with the masses. This notion of a group of ageless adepts appears to
have been appropriated from the occult writer, Edward Bulwer Lytton, whose novel *Zanoni* (1842), espouses just such a notion, while her idea of a new race of super-beings appears to originate in Bulwer Lytton’s *The Coming Race* (1870). But, if the origin of Theosophical ideas can be identified within the emerging genre of science-fiction, this merely reflects Blavatsky’s message that rather than acting in opposition to scientific progress, the occult actually operates in tandem with it. For, according to Blavatsky, the occult is simply that which science has yet to uncover. In this respect, Theosophy, far from presenting a break with the past, merely returns the occult to the position it has traditionally enjoyed, as a complementary approach to our understanding of the universe.

Blavatsky moved to India in 1879 and, with the Theosophical Society by now an international organisation, she moved its headquarters to Adyar, near Madras in 1882. Moving later to Germany, and from there to Ostend, where much of her *magnum opus*, *The Secret Doctrine*, was completed, she finally arrived in London in 1884. The Theosophical Society was already established in London, the London Lodge having been founded several years earlier, and on her arrival there was a ready-made network of rich and aristocratic friends, ready to support her for the rest of her life. With their help, Blavatsky set up her journal, *Lucifer*, before establishing her own exclusive arm of the Theosophical Society in London, the Blavatsky Lodge. Blavatsky lived first in south London at the home of popular novelist Mabel Collins, before moving to 17 Lansdowne Road in Holland Park, where she was soon to receive such distinguished guests as WB Yeats. Yeats joined the Theosophical Society in 1888 and was fasci-
nated by Blavatsky, whom he later compared to an old Irish peasant woman, ‘holy, sad and sly.’ In 1890, however, he was expelled from the movement, subsequently transferring his allegiance to the Order of the Golden Dawn.

It was also at Lansdowne Road that Blavatsky was introduced to Annie Besant, a meeting that resulted in Besant’s conversion to Theosophy. Besant, a well-known proponent of socialism, was soon an ardent follower of Blavatsky, making her home in St John’s Wood available for the society’s use. Blavatsky moved here in July 1890, the house soon becoming the centre for Theosophical work in London, and after a life of endless travel, both real and imagined, St John’s Wood was to be Blavatsky’s final destination. Suffering from heart disease, rheumatism and Bright’s disease, Blavatsky died at 19 Avenue Road, St John’s Wood on 8 May 1891, a date now celebrated by Theosophists worldwide as White Lotus Day. Her last words were, reportedly, ‘Keep the link unbroken! Do not let my last incarnation be a failure.’

And in this respect, at least, Blavatsky’s wishes appear to have been granted. For, despite a series of investigations into allegations of fraudulent practices, most significantly by the Society for Psychical Research, Theosophy has proved a remarkably resilient doctrine, withstanding such assaults upon its credibility and establishing a worldwide following.

Indeed, in the years following her death, first under the stewardship of Annie Besant, and later through a series of different incarnations, Theosophy has continued to thrive. And having acquired members as diverse as Oscar Wilde, George Bernard Shaw, Thomas Edison, and later the artists Mondrian and Kandinsky, Theosophy can claim to have had a lasting and disproportionately large influence upon twentieth-century
art and thought. This influence has been extended through the resurgence of New Age ideas since the 1960s, while as recently as 1995 The Hindu Times was able to claim, ‘If you dig deep enough, you’ll find Theosophical influence in the environmental, animal rights and vegetarian movements. No mystical endeavour in the West is exempt, be it yoga, meditation, channelling, near death experiences, natural healing, past life research, UFOs… Even Hinduism today is not exempt.’ Today, the Theosophical Society in England operates from its London headquarters at 50 Gloucester Place, W1U 8EA.

The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn (1888–1914)

If Theosophy came to displace Spiritualism as the dominant esoteric movement in late Victorian London, it was, in turn, soon to be eclipsed by the emergence of a movement that was to have a profound influence upon the course of cultural life in the coming century. Indeed, according to the historian Alex Owen, the Golden Dawn, or to be more precise, the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, ‘has done more than any other Order to influence the development of modern magic in Britain, Europe and the United States during the course of the twentieth century.’

Typically of such an occult institution, its origins remain unclear and subject to conflicting accounts, but it appears that the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn came into existence in February 1888 through the establishment of its first temple, Isis-Urania, in London. The responsibility for the birth of this fledgling movement lies with three men: the government
coroner and amateur occultist, William Wynn Westcott (1848–1925), his fellow Freemason and Rosicrucian, Dr William Robert Woodman (1828–1891) and the author of *The Kabbala Unveiled*, Samuel Liddell Mathers (1854–1918). As the story goes, at some time in the mid-1880s, the Reverend Alphonsus Woodford, a writer on Masonic matters, came into possession of what was to become known as the ‘cipher manuscript’. Woodford himself was unable to decipher the documents, which were written in a cipher and accompanied by a similarly encoded letter, but he passed them on to Westcott. By 1887, Westcott, with the assistance of Woodman and Mathers, had managed to decode them both, discovering that the manuscript outlined the details of five initiatory magical rituals. The letter was from Anna Sprengel, a Rosicrucian living in Stuttgart and a member of a secret society called *Die Goldene Dämmerung*, translated by Westcott as the Golden Dawn. In the correspondence that ensued between Westcott and Sprengel, and which lasted until Sprengel’s death in 1890, Westcott, along with Mathers and Woodman, were charged with the task of establishing a Golden Dawn temple to enact the magical rituals detailed in the manuscript.

A less enticing explanation for the emergence of the Golden Dawn, but one which dispenses with the need for Anna Sprengel, a continental occult secret society and a deciphered manuscript, is the view that Westcott simply invented the lot, hoping to form a rival to the Theosophical Society (the emergence of which, many would claim, was the result of Madame Blavatsky’s similarly vivid imagination). But, fraudulent charade or not, recruitment to this new society began in 1888 and, by the end of that year, 51 members had
been enrolled, rising to 126 by 1891, 48 of whom were women. It appears that the Golden Dawn’s gain was to prove the Theosophical Society’s loss, with news of this rival organisation posted in letters to the Theosophical Society’s journal, Lucifer, as well as through a word of mouth campaign which attracted followers from both Theosophy and the Rosicrucian Society of England, established some 20 years earlier, in 1866, by Robert Wentworth Little. One such recruit from the ranks of the Theosophists was WBYeats, who was initiated into the Golden Dawn at a ceremony at 17 Fitzroy Street on 7 March 1890, taking on a magical motto to denote his rebirth, as Demon et Deus Inversus, or ‘The Devil is the converse of God’. SoonYeats was to be joined by such London luminaries as AE Waite, Arthur Machen, Edith Bland (better known as writer E Nesbit) and Algernon Blackwood and, as we shall see, the Beast himself, Aleister Crowley. Indeed, it often appears that almost the entire sub-stratum of London literary life was, at one time or another, a member of the Golden Dawn, and although the supposed membership of some writers is often the result of a fanciful rewriting of history, it is clear that many of the leading lights of 1890s London were attracted to this esoteric order.

In essence, the structure of the Golden Dawn was based upon the symbolism of the Cabbala, and in particular the Sephiroth, or ten emanations of God, which form the cabalist ‘Tree of Life’, providing a series of grades through which the initiate must advance. In this respect, the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn had its roots in a well-established Western esoteric tradition, in contrast with the largely Eastern focus of its rival, the Theosophical Society. Drawing upon the Sephiroth, in conjunction with the structure dic-
tated by the cipher manuscript, Mathers was responsible for constructing a system of grades and levels and for devising their corresponding rituals. The five grades of the first, or outer order (Neophyte, Zelator, Theoricus, Practicus and Philosophicus), consisted largely of the accumulation of esoteric knowledge in preparation for admittance to the second order, also called the *Ordo Rosae Rubeae at Aureae Crucis* (Ruby Rose and Golden Cross). Through a further three grades (Adeptus Minor, Adeptus Major, Adeptus Exemptus) the aspirant would be instructed in the techniques of practical magic, divination and astral travel, as well as gaining the power to initiate aspirants to the first order. The third order consisted of a final three grades (Magister Templi, Magus, Ipsissimus), which were never to be bestowed, except it would seem, upon Aleister Crowley.²⁴

The Order continued to grow and, by 1896, had enrolled more than 300 members. By this time the London branch had been joined by the Osiris Temple in Weston-Super-Mare, the Horus Temple in Bradford and the Amen-Ra Temple in Edinburgh, while Mathers was later to found the Ahathoor Temple in Paris. Many of these new members were Rosicrucians and, from 1892, many of the rituals and ceremonies conducted in London made use of a specially constructed Vault of Adept, based upon the design of the tomb of the founder of the Rosicrucians, Christian Rosenkreutz.²⁵ According to the historian Anthony Clayton, the first vault was built at Thavies Inn, off Holborn Circus, and in the centre were a circular altar and a coffin intended for ritual re-enactments of the death and rebirth of Rosenkreutz himself. Clayton describes it as ‘a seven-sided wooden structure five feet wide and eight high, the interior lavishly decorated by
Mathers and his wife with a complex array of Cabalistic, astrological and alchemical symbols and hieroglyphics, all painted in vivid colours. This vault was dismantled in August 1892 and moved to a new address above a shoemaker’s in Clipstone Street, on the corner of Hanson Street, just to the east of Great Portland Street, before being moved once more, this time to 36 Blythe Road. Elsewhere, the Mark Mason’s Hall in Great Queen Street became another favoured location for Golden Dawn activities.

By the mid-1890s, the Golden Dawn was enjoying its heyday, having attracted many of its most famous cultural celebrities, and by the end of 1897 there had been some 323 initiations into the First, or Outer Order, in addition to 97 subsequent initiations into the Second Order. And yet 1897 was also the year in which the Golden Dawn, having reached the height of its influence, began to fall into decline. The catalyst for this reversal of fortune was Mathers’ own increasing sense of paranoia coupled with his belief that, like Blavatsky before him, he had formed a unique channel of communication with the ‘Secret Chiefs’, figures, actual or symbolic, who were the fabled source for the teachings of the Order. As Mathers grew ever more controlling, so splits began to appear and, in March 1897, Westcott was forced to resign from the Order, after details of his membership were leaked, possibly by Mathers, to his superiors at the Coroner’s Office. Now in sole control and the only remaining founder member, Mathers appointed the actress Florence Farr as Chief Adept, and soon antagonism began to emerge between the London Lodge and Mathers’ Paris branch, where, on 16 January 1900, he initiated Aleister Crowley into the ranks of the Second Order. Crowley’s elevation to the Second Order
proved highly divisive and, following attempts to close the London temple, Mathers was expelled from the Order. With the Isis-Urania temple now operating independently, the Golden Dawn began to fragment, and the early years of the twentieth century were to be ones of almost incessant in-fighting and dispute, culminating in the Order finally falling into abeyance with the outbreak of the First World War.

Following the occult revival of the 1960s, however, a period which heralded a major re-engagement with the occult philosophies of the \textit{fin de siècle}, interest in the Golden Dawn was reignited, in particular by the publication in English of Louis Pauwels’ and Jacques Bergier’s \textit{The Morning of the Magicians} in 1963. Today, the Golden Dawn persists, albeit in a form that its founders might struggle to recognise, and is now a non-profit organisation based in Florida.\footnote{29}

Aleister Crowley (1875–1947)

Born Edward Alexander Crowley on 12 October 1875 in Leamington Spa, Warwickshire, Aleister Crowley was to become the most notorious member of the Golden Dawn and was later to be dubbed ‘The Wickedest Man in the World’. Crowley was born into a wealthy and highly religious family, with both his parents belonging to the Plymouth Brethren, and Bible study was a daily routine of his childhood. His rebelliousness, however, led his mother to believe that he was the Anti-Christ of the Apocalypse, and she branded him the ‘Great Beast’. Crowley was subsequently to more than live up to this billing, later renouncing his Christian heritage and devoting his life to a study of the occult.

A privileged youth, in which he combined his studies at
Cambridge with a passion for chess and mountaineering (in 1902 he was to take part in a failed attempt to climb K2), Crowley first turned to the occult in 1897. His initiation as a Neophyte into the Golden Dawn took place the following year at the Mark Mason’s Hall in London on 18 November 1898. Taking the name Perdurabo, or ‘the one who will endure’, Crowley’s recruitment had disastrous consequences for the organisation, his divisive influence precipitating the Golden Dawn’s gradual disintegration.

During his three years at Cambridge, in which he switched from Moral Sciences to English Literature, but failed to acquire a degree, Crowley was to engage in a decadent lifestyle, a period described by historian Alex Owen: ‘A poseur extraordinaire in the style of Wilde, and a man who set out to replicate in life the dark, wicked, luxurious world of the fictional Dorian Gray, Crowley consistently experimented with the inversion of dominant categories. This was as much the case with his magic as with his own sexuality and gender identity; in each case, and in different but related ways, he played on the “yellow” theme of perverse delinquency.’ 30 In 1898 Crowley was to publish his first book of poetry, Aceldama, subtitled, ‘A Place to Bury Strangers in: A Philosophical Poem by a Gentleman of the University of Cambridge’. This was soon followed by the notoriously pornographic White Stains: The Literary Remains of George Archibald Bishop, a Neuropath of the Second Empire, which was to include such gems as ‘The Ballad of Passive Pederasty’.

Moving to London, Crowley took a flat at 67 & 69 Chancery Lane, under the name Count Vladimir Svareff, where, according to Anthony Clayton:

He intended to use the apartment for an intense period of
occult study and practice, fitting out two of the rooms as temples, one white and the other black. Six mirrors, measuring six by eight feet – intended to deflect the energy of any magical force and retain it within the room – dominated the interior of the white temple. The black temple was a cupboard-sized space containing a small altar in the shape of a Negro standing on his hands and supporting the table surface with his feet. The central feature of this room was a human skeleton, which Crowley ‘fed’ with small birds and blood in order to bring it to life – his experiment failed. Both temples had a magic circle and pentagram drawn on the floor; Crowley at this point in his life was torn between the paths of black and white magic.31

The answer to this dilemma was provided through a meeting with Allan Bennett, an analytical chemist, fellow Golden Dawn initiate and the man best known for introducing Buddhism to the West. Meeting Crowley at a ritual ceremony, Bennett was soon to move into Crowley’s Chancery Lane flat as his Guru and teacher. Under his guidance, Crowley was to acquire expertise in a wide spectrum of occult arts from divination, clairvoyance and the Cabbala, to geomancy, symbolism and the use of the Tarot. He was also introduced to drugs such as opium, morphine and cocaine, which were, along with hashish, to become central to Crowley’s magical rituals.32 Crowley’s Chancery Lane flat was also to become the site of his attempts to perform the ‘Abra-Melin Operation’, ‘an intensive six month working that required seclusion, fasting, meditation and immense self-discipline, intended to culminate in attainment of the Knowledge and Conversation of

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the Holy Guardian Angel.’\textsuperscript{33} It is not known if Crowley was successful in his experiment but, according to one account, on returning to his flat one night with his friend George Cecil Jones, they found the door to the temple open and were greeted by the sight of ‘semi-materialised beings’ marching around the room. They counted 316 of them, who were described, named and put down in a book. According to Crowley, it was ‘the most awesome and ghastly experience I had known’.\textsuperscript{34}

Having been initiated into the First Order of the Golden Dawn in 1898, Crowley progressed to the rank of Philosophus the following year and was soon determined to enter the Second Order. This time, however, his antagonism with other members of the order, particularly WB Yeats and AE Waite, resulted in his request being denied. But through his friendship with Mathers, Crowley was able to sidestep the objections of the London Lodge and he was admitted to the Second Order in a ceremony held in Paris in 1900. Exacerbating the already strained relationship between the London and Paris branches of the Order, Crowley’s admittance infuriated the London temple, which refused to recognise his initiation. Now acting as Mathers’ emissary, Crowley returned to London in April of 1900 in order to seize control of the Order’s premises at 36 Blythe Road in Hammersmith. But the combination of Yeats, the landlord and a passing police constable proved enough to rebuff Crowley’s attempted coup and the house remained in the hands of the London leadership.\textsuperscript{35}

Following these events, Crowley retreated to his home overlooking Loch Ness, and from here his notoriety continued to spread. In the following decades, Crowley continued
his career as a prolific writer, producing a series of largely forgettable novels such as *Moonchild* (1929) in which Mathers was to appear as the primary villain (Crowley casts himself as Simon Iff), as well as poetry, plays and a number of treatises on occult matters. The best known of these relate his attempts to establish his own religious philosophy, ‘Thelema’, first announced in 1904 and later outlined in his *The Book of the Law* (1938). Unsurprisingly difficult to elucidate, Thelema’s chief precepts are ‘Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the law’ and ‘Love is the law, love under will’. This philosophy was put into practice in 1920 through the establishment of a commune in Cefalù, Sicily called the Abbey of Thelema. Here, initiates were required to study Crowley’s writings alongside regular yogic practices and daily ‘adorations of the sun’. Crowley was later to be expelled from Italy.

Having lived in London and Paris for much of his life and having travelled to many of the most exotic places on Earth, the circumstances of Crowley’s demise were rather more mundane. Finally succumbing to a respiratory infection, he died in a Hastings boarding house on 1 December 1947, at the age of 72. But like Dr Dee before him (Crowley believed himself to be the reincarnation of Dee’s fraudulent sidekick, Edward Kelly), Crowley’s notoriety was to inspire a series of fictional alter-egos, and he lives on in novels such as Somerset Maugham’s *The Magician* (1908), in which he appears as the character Oliver Haddo, and as Karswell in MR James’ short-story *Casting the Runes* (1911). Later, he was to appear as the Satanist, Mocata, in Dennis Wheatley’s *The Devil Rides Out* (1934), while he is perhaps best served by the portrayal of Scorpio Murtlock in Anthony Powell’s sequence of novels, *A Dance to the Music of Time* (1951–75).
Notes

1. Lachman, p. 150.
5. Westwood & Simpson, p. 481.
8. Lachman, p. 156.
10. Gary Lachman has observed ‘the occult coincidence or synchronicity’ of the year 1875, noting: ‘It was the year of Edward Alexander – better known as Aleister – Crowley’s birth. It was the year Madame Helena Petrovna Blavatsky and Colonel Henry Steel Olcott formed the Theosophical Society in New York City. And it was also the year that saw the death of Alphonse Louis Constant… better known to students of the occult arts as Eliphas Levy, the Professor of Transcendental Magic.’ Lachman, p. 103.
11. Lachman, p. 158.
13. The London Lodge of the Theosophical Society was founded in 1878 by Charles Carleton Massey under the name of the British Theosophical Society of the Arya
Samaj of Aryavart. This had been the first official lodge to be founded since the society’s conception in 1875 and had been formed in alliance with the Hindu reform movement ‘Arya Samaj’, although the two movements were to separate in 1882. In 1883, Alfred Sinnett gained membership of the London Lodge and later that year the lodge split, with Sinnett and his followers forming a separate organisation. Sinnett, the author of books such as *Esoteric Buddhism* and *The Occult World*, was later to become President of the London Lodge. In 1887, however, 14 members of the London Lodge were to break away once again, this time to found the Blavatsky Lodge. In December 1888, the British Section of the Theosophical Society was founded and, in 1890, Blavatsky founded the European Section of the Theosophical Society.

17. Washington, p. 100.
20. For details of this contested history see Clayton, pp. 169–175.
21. Claims of fraudulent activity were dismissed, by Arthur Machen at least, a member of the Golden Dawn in 1899, as essentially benign: ‘So ingeniously was this occult fraud “put upon the market” that, to the best of my belief, the flotation remains a mystery; and, after all, it did nobody


27. Clayton, p. 171.


29. For details go to http://hermeticgoldendawn.easycgi.com/index.shtml


35. Clayton, p. 175.
Now, at the end of the twentieth century, we are beginning to realize that there are other enchanted areas in London which remain visible and powerful to anyone who cares to look for them... the enchantment is one of place and time; it is as if an area can create patterns of interest, or patterns of habitation, so that the same kinds of activity... seem to emerge in the same small territory.

Peter Ackroyd, ‘William Blake, a Spiritual Radical’

Since the occult heyday of the late Victorian era, much of London’s iconic topography has been erased through a combination of wartime destruction and peacetime redevelopment. Yet beneath the concrete, London’s occult traditions remain intact, and for those who know the way, an enchanted realm may still be found behind the all too often banal exterior of the contemporary city.

London’s occult nature can best be characterised as a current that flows beneath the surface, occasionally breaking through to disrupt our everyday experiences, more often remaining undetected and unacknowledged. In this light, much of London’s twentieth-century history can be seen as a reac-
tion against the occult flowering of the fin de siècle, and a period in which the occult returned to its more familiar role as an overlooked alternative to more orthodox beliefs. And yet, in recent years, the tide has turned and London has once again witnessed an occult revival, as a new generation of artists and writers turn away from official representations of the city and its past in favour of those places and events which have been unjustly neglected or wilfully obscured.

Today, the rise of psychogeography has provided a tool with which to explore and map this hidden city, a means through which London can celebrate the marginal and the eccentric. And in doing so, it presents a challenge to the stifling conformity of the heritage makeover that threatens to engulf the city. But this current vogue for psychogeography and its practitioners is, of course, merely a contemporary manifestation of much older traditions, in which London has been repeatedly overlaid and dissected by maps and symbolic patterns claiming to reveal its true dimensions. In the twentieth century, this process has been facilitated by Alfred Watkins, whose discovery of ley lines in the 1920s has been hugely influential upon today’s generation of urban wanderers. Following in Watkins’ footsteps, writers and walkers such as Chris Street and Ian Sinclair have attempted to delineate those lines of force connecting London’s sites of political and sacred significance.

But, elsewhere, attempts to explain or encapsulate the city in a single overview continue to give way to those local myths and legends that the city has generated throughout its history. For just as Spring-Heeled Jack came to symbolise the birth of the urban legend in the Victorian city, so too has London produced an equally occult figure for more modern times. The
legend of the Highgate Vampire, which horrified North London in the 1970s, shares many of the characteristics of its predecessor and, in this respect, acts as a reminder to those who see in today’s city little evidence of London’s more outlandish past.

Ley Lines and Earthstars

Ley lines are hypothetical alignments of places of geographical or religious significance, such as ancient monuments and megaliths. And while links between such sites have been acknowledged for centuries, the first attempt to provide a systematic account of their existence was that made by the amateur archaeologist Alfred Watkins (1855–1935). Watkins made his discovery in a single moment of revelatory insight whilst riding near Blackwardine in the Herefordshire countryside on 30 June 1921. A somewhat unlikely prophet for New Age ideas, Watkins spent much of his life as a sales rep for a local brewer, a biographical fact that was no doubt seen by his detractors as revealing the source of much of his inspiration. Years of travelling across the Herefordshire countryside developed Watkins’ interest in local history and customs, and at the age of 65, he suddenly perceived this familiar landscape to be covered by a vast network of straight tracks, aligned through hills, mounds and other landmarks. This moment of inspiration resulted in Early British Trackways (1922) and later The Old Straight Track (1925) in which he propounded, in a sober and deliberate fashion, his argument for the existence of this prehistoric network.

Needless to say, Watkins’ ideas were regarded as heretical by the archaeological establishment and, after the initial con-
troversy had died down, they were soon forgotten. With the rise of New Age philosophies in the 1960s, however, books such as John Michell’s *The View Over Atlantis* (1969) proved highly influential in re-establishing the popularity of an amalgam of esoteric practices, and it was against this backdrop that *The Old Straight Track* was rediscovered and it was reissued in 1970. Soon a densely written and researched obscurity without any overt claim to occult significance had acquired a reputation somewhat at odds with its actual content.

‘My main theme’, writes Watkins, ‘is the alignment across miles of country of a great number of objects, or sites of objects, of prehistoric antiquity. And this not in one or a few instances, but in scores and hundreds. Such alignments are either facts beyond the possibility of accidental coincidence or they are not.’ Watkins’ theory is a straightforward one, backed up by numerous examples, and yet many of his claims have been dismissed on the grounds that, with such a wealth of prehistoric sites in this country, some of them are bound to form a suggestive pattern of some description. Equally, allowing for the veracity of Watkins’ schema, it is far from clear if such a mapping of the landscape indicates any sacred or occult significance or whether it simply reflects trade routes or navigational points.

Watkins’ work can be read alongside Elizabeth Gordon’s earlier investigation into London’s prehistoric sites, *Prehistoric London: Its Mounds and Circles* (1914), in which she suggests a kinship between the Trojans and the British, arguing that the site of ancient Troy discovered by Schliemann bears important resemblance to the ‘New Troy on the Thames’. Gordon identifies evidence of two stone circles and at least four mounds in prehistoric London and, in a similar fashion, Watkins con-
firms the existence of London leys, commenting, ‘There are curious facts linking up orientation with the ley system illustrated by some London churches.’ Watkins suggests that the sites of church building in ancient Britain in most cases correspond to ‘mark-points’ of prehistoric significance that can be aligned through leys. He gives the following London examples:

(a) St. Martins-in-the-Fields, St. Mary-le-Strand, St. Clement Dane, and St. Dunstan’s, Fleet Street, align to the site of an ancient mound (approximately at Arnold’s Circus, Shoreditch)… and this is verified as a track by lying approximately on part of the Strand and Pall Mall.

(b) St. Paul’s, Covent Garden, The Temple, St. Bride’s, Fleet Street, church on Ludgate Hill, one near the Guildhall, St. Stephen’s, Coleman Street, all align to St. Botolph’s, Bishopsgate.

(c) The Temple, St. Paul’s Cathedral, and St. Helen’s, Bishopsgate, align to St. Dunstan’s Stepney, which has pre-Conquest remains, while two other churches and the bank site (where was a church), are on the ley.

And elsewhere:

Another orientation is revealed in plotting out a line from the white mount (Tower) to Southwark Cathedral, which also goes through St. George’s in the East. This alignment goes to Westminster, and converges with a line down the middle of Tothill Street, to a point in Wellington Barracks. Lines on the exact orientation of Westminster Abbey and the adjacent St. Margaret’s Church were then laid down,
and they too converge to the above point... and it leaves a strong presumption that this was the point at which was situated the tot, toot, or mound, which gave its name to Tothill Fields and Street.\textsuperscript{5}

As we have seen, it is through exactly such an orientation that Iain Sinclair first proposed his mapping of Hawksmoor’s London churches in \textit{Lud Heat}, and in this respect Watkins’ theories act as a precursor to today’s interest in psychogeography, a discipline which has underwritten similar attempts to establish a network linking London’s sacred sites.

Perhaps the most complex and systematic of such attempts is that presented by Chris Street in his \textit{Earthstars: The Geometric Groundplan Underlying London’s Ancient Sacred Sites and its Significance for the New Age} (1990). Street demonstrates that much of London was laid out geometrically in a series of star patterns radiating around a central axis running from Camlet Moat, near Cockfosters in the north, to Pollard’s Hill, Norbury in the south. In his introduction to \textit{Earthstars}, John Michell writes, ‘London’s outer suburbs contain a number of ancient sacred sites that are of far greater significance than either Westminster Abbey or St. Pauls.’\textsuperscript{6} And in locating the axis of his system in London’s overlooked suburban spaces, rather than within the city’s official centre, Street indicates the ways in which London’s underlying pattern remains hidden from the casual observer. Camlet Moat is a corruption of its earlier name Camelot, and despite the mythical significance of the name, the site is now completely neglected. Similarly, Pollard’s Hill in Norbury is today little more than a modest earthwork crowned by a graffiti-scrawled shelter. Yet from these obscure origins, Street iden-
tifies an alignment that passes through, amongst other points of interest, Highgate Cemetery, the Central Synagogue on Hallam Street, the Queen Victoria Memorial Fountain in front of Buckingham Palace and Westminster Cathedral. Through a series of triangulations, this central axis gives way to a series of complex geometrical patterns in which Street shows London to be at the centre of a national, even global, web of interconnected sites whose alignments reveal the true pattern underlying our familiar landscape. It is the very complexity of this pattern that, according to Street, confirms the presence of an outside agency. For ‘there are too many coincidences to be a coincidence’, he claims. ‘They all interconnect so precisely that they can only be interpreted as an integrated whole, a composite design so complex that chance, the easy answer to the non-thinking man’s enigma, seems the least likely solution.’

Using the ‘sacred’ geometry of a number of basic geometrical structures, such as the pentagram and the hexagram, whose recurrence throughout nature makes them the blueprint for all physical forms, Street imbues his ‘star-lines’ with a cosmic significance: ‘They have inescapable cosmic connections. They are a manifestation of the formative forces of creation, the life-force, not just of this planet, but of the entire universe.’ If one shares Street’s perspective, it would appear that Earthstars unveils a model of the universe with which to challenge Copernicus, the sun relegated from its pivotal position in favour of a schema in which it is London itself around which we rotate. To many Londoners, of course, the idea of a London-centric universe would find ready acceptance, and yet as we follow Street’s conjectures to their logical conclusion, it becomes increasingly difficult to retain sight of the
city as it becomes obscured beneath a confusion of overlaid geometrical patterns.

In a return to the visionary terminology of William Blake, Street concludes that London may in fact be, despite all appearances to the contrary, the Holy City of Revelation, the New Jerusalem. Access to this celestial realm that stands behind our own is dependent simply upon our ability to recognise it, for it has in fact been here all along, ‘We just didn’t notice it before. Our minds were not ready to receive it.’ Of course, it is easy simply to dismiss Street’s findings, especially in the light of his exaggerated claims for London’s place within the divine order. And yet, there is an undeniable elegance to his theory, which, in recognising the city as one whose visible surface conceals the truth of its occult design, allows Street to take his place within the pantheon of earlier London visionaries.

The Highgate Vampire (1967–1979)

Having always had a passion for strange and mysterious places that lie one step beyond the world we all know, my interest was more than aroused on hearing of the Highgate phenomenon which was at the time being taken for a ghost: it was like finding an undiscovered country waiting to be explored. Who would have thought then that I was on the trail of the ‘Highgate Vampire’, as it became known.

Sean Manchester, The Highgate Vampire

If Spring-Heeled Jack was the urban legend that came to symbolise the occult in Victorian London, then its twentieth-cen-
tury counterpart is the Highgate Vampire, whose nocturnal activities proved equally shocking to London’s inhabitants more than a century later. And, like its Victorian forebear, the legend of the Highgate Vampire occupies a similar role within the public imagination, a series of sightings in the late 1960s and early 1970s briefly provoking a feverish response from the press before gradually subsiding and taking its place within the archive of London’s occult history.

Of course, the facts surrounding this case are obscured entirely by the superstructure of rumour, exaggeration and myth which has been built upon them. And while these details may be seen as merely symptomatic of the processes by which urban legends are formed, the allure of the story itself is undeniable and, in all its overblown glory, it was briefly to transform Highgate cemetery into a stage set of Hammer-style horror.

This narrative of the undead in N6 remains, like all urban myths, a highly contested one in which those who claim to have been party to the events jealously guard their version, while vocally dismissing those counter-claims which might undermine them. And in this instance, the story of the Highgate Vampire is inseparable from the rivalry between would-be vampire hunters, Sean Manchester and David Farrant, who have continued, some 30 years after the event, to denounce each other publicly, and the validity of their respective accounts.12 But, although Farrant’s recollection of events benefits from the delivery of an enjoyably vitriolic character-assassination of his rival, it simply cannot compete with the straight-faced sensationalism of Manchester’s book, *The Highgate Vampire: The Infernal World of the Undead Unearthed at London’s Famous Highgate Cemetery and Environs* (1985) and it
is from this account that I will be drawing in the following summary of events.

By the late 1960s, Highgate cemetery had fallen into a state of neglect and had become the destination of many young people seeking evidence of the occult, and it was in 1967 that two young schoolgirls (schoolgirls being something of a staple element in tales of this sort) were walking home down Swain’s Lane, adjacent to the cemetery. One of them, 16-year-old Elizabeth Wojdyla, remembers having just passed the north gate to the cemetery, ‘when we both saw this scene of graves directly in front of us. And the graves were opening up; and the people were rising’. Manchester, a local resident at the time, employed in an unofficial capacity as part-time exorcist, was to meet Wojdyla in 1969 and describes how the girl, still harrowed by her experience, and clearly suffering from demonic possession, was finally released from her ordeal through his ministrations. But by this time, sightings of ghosts and unexplained occult happenings in and around Highgate cemetery had begun to attract the interest of the *Hampstead and Highgate Express*, which ran a series of stories. One of these involved another local teenager, Jacqueline Beckwith, who was awoken during the night with ‘something cold and clinging’ on her hand, which left her with deep marks the following morning. While, elsewhere, there were reports of a ‘tall man in a hat’ walking across Swain’s Lane before disappearing through the wall of the cemetery. Meanwhile, in the early months of 1970, a number of dead animals, completely drained of blood and with lacerations to the throat, began to appear in Waterlow Park and Highgate Cemetery. On the basis of this, admittedly meagre, evidence, Manchester came to a horrifying conclusion: ‘It became ap-
pallingly apparent. The people of Highgate were not witnessing a harmless earthbound apparition flitting across their graveyard, but a vampire.’

On Friday, 27 February 1970, the *Hampstead and Highgate Express* ran the headline ‘Does a Vampyre Walk in Highgate?’ and, as a result of this story, Manchester was to be contacted by the sister of a ‘beautiful 22–year-old woman, whom I shall call Lucia’. Lucia, as it turns out, was a somnambulist with two tell-tale pin pricks to her neck, who had begun sleepwalking to Swain’s Lane. Following Lucia, Manchester was led to the heart of Highgate cemetery and to the columbarium: ‘This sunken circle of shadowy vaults and catacombs whose shelves occasionally spill their mouldy contents as if gorged with too many coffins, was clearly the nucleus of the atmosphere which pervaded the graveyard.’

Manchester planned a return to the columbarium, this time to enter the catacombs, but by now Thames TV were on the case, and in what was, no doubt, a coincidence of scheduling, they ran their programme on Friday 13 March 1970, on the eve of the proposed vampire-hunt. By this time, the cemetery had been overrun by hordes of interested spectators and freelance vampire-slayers, amongst them, we are told, ‘Mr Alan Blood, who had journeyed forty miles from Chelmsford, Essex, to seek out the undead being.’ And it was against the backdrop of this media frenzy that Manchester and his two assistants penetrated the columbarium, discovering three evacuated coffins. They proceeded to line the coffins with garlic and a cross before pouring a circle of salt around them and sprinkling them with holy water. Soon a low, booming vibration could be heard that became louder and louder. ‘Then it stopped. There was nothing more.’
But this was by no means the end. For, on 7 August 1970, the discovery of a headless body was reported, amidst new claims of satanic activity within Highgate cemetery. The body was discovered near the columbarium, naturally enough by a group of three 15–year-old schoolgirls, and on re-entering the columbarium one of the coffins was found to be missing. On further examination, a nearby coffin was discovered without a nameplate and, on opening it, Manchester was greeted by a grisly sight:

Ignoring the mood of foreboding which now engulfed us all, I stepped forward and, with heart pounding, raised the massive lid. My torch lit up in unnerving revelation the sleeping form of something that had long been dead; something nevertheless gorged and stinking with the life-blood of others, fresh dots of which still adhered to the edge of the mouth whose fetid breath made me sick to my stomach. The glazed eyes stared horribly – almost mocking me, almost knowing that my efforts to destroy it would be thwarted. Under the parchment-like skin a faint bluish tinge could be detected. The face was the colour of a three-day-old corpse.\(^1\)

Knowing that there had been no recent admissions to the cemetery and none within the vault for more than 300 years, Manchester prepared to despatch this undead creature, in time-honoured fashion, with a wooden stake. But, persuaded by his assistant that this would be an act of sacrilege, Manchester instead resorted to a combination of salt, garlic and holy water before performing an act of exorcism. With this completed, the vault was permanently sealed and these
solemn events were recorded for posterity in the *Hornsey Journal* of 28 August 1970. Needless to say, Manchester should have used the stake, because the Highgate Vampire was to return once more.

It was around this time that Manchester first became acquainted with another member of that close-knit profession, the vampire hunter. But, while David Farrant seems to have shared Manchester’s skill for publicity, he fared less well with the authorities. His brief career was curtailed in 1974, following his conviction for malicious damage to a memorial, having entered Highgate cemetery to carry out ‘unofficial exorcisms’.

By this time, the cemetery appeared to have been rid of its unwanted guest. But Manchester’s research into the origin of this demonic figure soon led him to St Michael’s Church overlooking the cemetery and built on the site of what was once a mansion leased by a European nobleman fleeing the vampire epidemic that afflicted south-east Europe in the eighteenth century. This, Manchester concluded, was the likely origin of the Highgate Vampire, who it now appeared had been evicted from the cemetery only to take new lodgings in a neo-gothic house on the border of Highgate and Hornsey.

For, following a further spate of sightings in the winter of 1973, it became apparent that the Highgate Vampire was still at large and, clearly territorial, could not bring himself to sever his connection with north London. So it was that Manchester found himself at this house, nicknamed locally ‘The House of Dracula’, and standing on the junction of Crescent Road and Avenue Road in Crouch End. Entering the house with two assistants, Manchester was immediately struck by a pungent odour, the source of which was the re-
mains of two black cats, slaughtered as part of a demonic ceremony. But worse was to come, for having been forced to retreat to their car, Manchester and his assistants spent the night repeatedly harassed by a ‘black spectre’, ‘something born of the devil’, against which their only defence was their supply of garlic and holy water. But they survived the night and, as daylight broke, Manchester returned to the house, where he discovered the familiar black casket of the Highgate Vampire that had once lain within the columbarium. This time there could be only one solution:

With a mighty blow I drove the stake through the creature’s heart, then shielded my ears as a terrible roar emitted from the bowels of hell. This died away as suddenly as it had erupted and all became still. We witnessed the body-shell cave in and quietly turn filthy brown which soon became a sluggish flow of inhuman slime and viscera in the bottom of the casket.

The casket and its contents were cremated on a pyre outside and the mansion itself was subsequently demolished and flats built in its place. But does its evil legacy live on? Some four years later, in 1979, another outbreak of animal deaths in Hampstead and Finchley alerted Manchester to the continued threat London faced from its undead residents. For while a return to Highgate cemetery confirmed that it had been ‘truly purged of the vampire’s pollutions’, the Highgate Vampire, ‘though destroyed, had left a legacy which carried the curse of immortality and the need to quaff warm blood.’
Psychogeography and the Occult Revival

Walking is the best way to explore and exploit the city; the changes, shifts, breaks in the cloud helmet, movement of light on water. Drifting purposefully is the recommended mode, tramping asphalted earth in alert reverie, allowing the fiction of an underlying pattern to reveal itself.

Iain Sinclair,
Lights Out for the Territory

Born of a radical avant-garde movement in post-war Paris, psychogeography has travelled a long way since, both politically and geographically. Crossing the Channel to provide what has since become the most celebrated form of topographical discourse in contemporary London, psychogeography has also acquired a preoccupation with the occult which would no doubt have left its progenitor, Guy Debord, more than a little bemused.

Debord first described psychogeography as ‘a general term for the phenomena a few of us were investigating around the summer of 1953’ and these investigations concerned the emotional and psychological impact of places, usually urban, upon the individual, with a view to formulating a reorganisation of society itself. Like so many of those theories which espouse a revolutionary restructuring of society, however, the movement from text to reality often proves problematic, and psychogeography remains a highly nebulous concept whose practical application sees a great deal lost in translation. The term finds its ‘official’ definition in one of the many, and often risible, proclamations of the Situationist International (1957–1972), which under the stewardship of Debord con-
continued to publish a series of ever more grandiose plans for their forthcoming revolution. Here, psychogeography is described as ‘the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organised or not, on the emotions and behaviour of individuals’.  

Elsewhere, Debord notes a ‘pleasing vagueness’ in his definition, a vagueness that was soon to become apparent when his followers returned from the field having attempted to put theory into practice. For such was the paucity of results achieved by those charged with recording their emotional and behavioural responses that psychogeography was quickly discarded by Debord, who failed to make any mention of the term in his major theoretical statement *Society of the Spectacle* (1967).

Yet, against all the odds, psychogeography has escaped from its expected fate as a forgotten footnote to an obscure movement, and has instead been reinvented as a shorthand for a number of practices, literary, political and artistic, which concern themselves both with the rediscovery of those previously overlooked margins of the city and with an antiquarian desire to unearth the more occluded aspects of local history. The result has been a curious blend of walking and writing, in which London has been represented in a way that Debord and his fellow Situationists would surely never have envisaged. In fact, so ubiquitous has this term now become that, far from the samizdat publications of the 1960s, we now find the term employed by Will Self in his eponymous column in the *Independent*. But what has motivated this reinvention of psychogeography and how can we account for its new-found popularity?

The answer to this question lies in the wider resurgence of occult interest that has taken place over the last 20 years,
particularly in the portrayal of London as a city under threat from an erasure of identity. In a whole raft of novels from Christopher Fowler’s *Roofworld* (1988) to Neil Gaiman’s *Neverwhere* (1996), from Peter Ackroyd’s *Hawksmoor* (1985) to Ian Sinclair’s *Downriver* (1991), London becomes the site of a conflict between its occult past and a present which threatens to sever all links with these earlier traditions. Here, London becomes a tale of two cities: a surface of wealth and power symbolised by the financial alchemy of the City, contrasted with the city that lies behind or below, a city of the lost and disenfranchised who lead lives hidden from view. In short, the occult revival, of which psychogeography is itself one element, comes to symbolise a political struggle for control of the city’s soul, a Manichean conflict of opposites, as an urban underclass faces up to the challenge of Thatcherism and its successors.

Nowhere is this sense of political struggle more overt than in the writings of Iain Sinclair who is, more than any other figure, responsible for the popularity that psychogeography currently enjoys. As we have seen, Sinclair’s alignment of Hawksmoor’s London churches offers clear parallels with the theory of ley lines articulated by Alfred Watkins, while his belief in the aimless drift as the most rewarding means of traversing the city owes much to the psychogeographical theory of the ‘dérive’, or drift, espoused by Debord and the Situationists. Yet, Sinclair’s clearest and most stringent description of London as the site of occult power is reserved for his political engagement with the politics of Thatcherism, in which Thatcher herself becomes the ‘Widow’, a monstrous demonic creature attempting to rewrite the city in her own image.30
According to the critic, Roger Luckhurst, *Downriver* ‘repeatedly stages forms of séance communication with London’s disappeared. Forgotten and despised areas, abandoned buildings or empty rooms work as conductors to revivify buried histories.’ And, as such, Sinclair’s novel may be seen within the wider context of his ‘London Project’, in which London’s psychic topography becomes the focus for a new kind of psychogeographical investigation, concerned less with the establishment of new forms of urban living than with the preservation of a past which is perceived to be under threat. In what is effectively an act of memorial for a vanishing city, Sinclair is aided and abetted by a number of poets and filmmakers from Aidan Andrew Dun and Allen Fisher to Chris Petit and Patrick Keiller. But is this loose alliance motivated by a political impulse to save the city from disappearance, or does their very preoccupation with the occult simply act as a diversion from a political engagement with London’s current ills? Luckhurst argues that the occult has indeed become a distraction, little more than a means of immersing ourselves in arcane speculation to ward off more pressing concerns over London’s governance and, in particular, to blind us to the absence of political representation within the city. And he is certainly correct to emphasise the nostalgic element within London’s occult revival, for the occult has always drawn its power from within earlier traditions. Indeed, psychogeography, despite Debord’s protestations to the contrary, is itself merely a contemporary manifestation of a form of urban exploration that, in London at least, finds retrospective validation in the work of earlier London visionaries such as Defoe, Blake and de Quincey.

It seems to me, however, that far from being a diversion-
ary tactic, the occult is in fact the continuation of the political by other means. For, increasingly, the nature of political and economic power in London, both in the financial heart of the city and in Westminster, comes to resemble that of the occult. Here we find closely guarded institutions with little visible connection with the everyday city; the alchemy by which invisible forms of wealth are generated is replicated in political transactions that bypass all forms of democratic scrutiny; ancient customs and traditions are observed by a coterie of individuals whose lives are conducted out of view. While elsewhere, a similarly hidden society operates within the city, equally inaccessible to the majority, and also governed by customs and traditions beyond those of our everyday experience. This, of course, is the realm of the underclass, whose poverty appears to render its members invisible to their fellow Londoners and whose existence acts as an uncomfortable reminder of the city that lies beneath our own.

Yet, if the occult sustains its power through its secrecy and its hidden traditions, what happens when these are exposed to the light of day? For by revealing that which was hidden, the occult revival is in danger of endorsing an experience of the city every bit as inauthentic as the heritage artifice it has persistently challenged. In this sense, psychogeography, with its promotion of the marginal and the overlooked, runs the risk of acting as a trailblazer for the heritage industry, and in doing so becoming merely one more London ‘brand’. Iain Sinclair, alert to such a development, has commented:

For me, it’s a way of psychoanalyzing the psychosis of the place in which I happen to live. I’m just exploiting it because I think it’s a canny way to write about London. Now
it’s become the name of a column by Will Self, in which he seems to walk about the South Downs with a pipe, which has got absolutely nothing to do with psychogeography. There’s this awful sense that you’ve created a monster. In a way I’ve allowed myself to become this London brand. I’ve become a hack on my own mythology, which fascinates me. From there on in you can either go with it or subvert it.³³

Psychogeography, in its current incarnation, certainly appears to have fallen victim to its own success, taking on exactly the appearance of a marketable brand that it has traditionally sought to undermine. And one consequence of an underground movement, once at odds with the status quo but now having gained official recognition, is that its political edge is inevitably blunted. Indeed, as Patrick Keiller has noted, once divorced from its political roots, it is unclear what role psychogeography can usefully perform: ‘The Situationists saw their explorations at least partly as a preliminary to the production of some kind of new space, but in 1990s London, they seemed to have become an end in themselves, so that “psychogeography” led not to avant-garde architecture such as Constant’s “New Babylon”, but to, say, the Time Out Book of London Walks.’³⁴

Ultimately, then, this is the paradox that psychogeography, and the occult itself, now faces, both in London and elsewhere. For, by celebrating that which has been hidden, the spotlight of popular recognition must inevitably diminish as well as illuminate. It is for this reason, perhaps, that historically, the fortunes of the occult have been subject to such dramatic fluctuations, and why psychogeography, having
re-emerged in response to a particular historical moment and a particular sense of crisis, may now fall into abeyance. But regardless of such an outcome, an Occult London will, of course, continue to exist behind its more familiar façade, until that time at which, once again, it breaks through to the surface.

Notes

5. Watkins, p. 133.
7. Street, p. 32.
8. Street, p. 52.
9. Street, p. 92.
10. Street, p. 106.
12. For details of these conflicting accounts, visit the websites http://highgatevampiresoc.mysite.wanadoo-members.co.uk/ and http://www.holygrail-church.fsnet.co.uk/Vampire%20Research%20Society.htm
15. Manchester, p. 45.
17. Manchester, p. 50.
20. Manchester, p. 68.
23. Manchester, p. 113.
24. Manchester, p. 117.
28. ‘Internationale Situationiste #1’ in Knabb, p. 45.
32. This argument, in which the occult is discussed through its relationship to questions of political governance, finds


34. Patrick Keiller interviewed by Steve Hanson in *Street Signs*, Spring 1994, at www.goldsmiths.ac.uk/cucr/pdf/1iss6.pdf
Appendix I:
Occult London in Literature

The following list is not, and makes no attempt to be, an exhaustive one. Dominated by those texts published during the fin de siècle years of the late nineteenth century as well as those born of today’s occult revival, it provides a representative outline of that fictional city which exists in tandem with our own. In order of publication:

Daniel Defoe, *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722)
William Blake, *Jerusalem* (1820)
Thomas de Quincey, *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* (1822)
Edgar Allan Poe, *The Man of the Crowd* (1840)
GWM Reynolds, *The Mysteries of London* (1844)
Charles Dickens, *Bleak House* (1853)
Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Suicide Club* (1878)
Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886)
Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Sign of Four* (1890)
Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891)
Arthur Machen, *The Great God Pan* (1894)
Arthur Machen, *The Three Impostors* (1895)
Bram Stoker, *Dracula* (1897)
Jack London, *The People of the Abyss* (1903)
G. K. Chesterton, *The Man who was Thursday* (1908)
Sax Rohmer, *The Mystery of Dr Fu Manchu* (1913)
Arthur Machen, *The London Adventure, or the Art of Wandering* (1924)
Louis-Ferdinand Céline, *Guignol’s Band* (1954)
Maureen Duffy, *Capital* (1975)
Alan Moore & Eddie Campbell, *From Hell* (1991)
Iain Sinclair, *Downriver* (1991)
Peter Ackroyd, *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* (1994)
Aidan Andrew Dun, *Vale Royal* (1995)
Christopher Fowler, *Disturbia* (1997)
Barnes Common (SW13)

Owned by the Church since the Middle Ages, Barnes Common is today a designated local nature reserve and, at more than 100 acres, one of the largest areas of unenclosed land close to central London. Home to Barnes Common Cemetery from 1834 until its demolition in 1966, what remains of the site is now described as a ‘wasted sort of place: a few broken headstones survive, but most of the ground is overgrown and seems to be used mainly for drinking and sex.’ In 1837, however, Barnes Common briefly gained occult notoriety as the site of Spring-Heeled Jack’s debut appearance, described here by Tom Slemen:

One evening in September, 1837, a businessman who had been working overtime at his office decided to risk a short cut across the common on his way home. Even as he passed the railings of the adjoining cemetery, the man’s thoughts did not wander onto the subject of the supernatural. His mind was too preoccupied with the mundane matters relating to his business.

A figure suddenly vaulted high over the railings of the
cemetery as if propelled from a springboard — and landed with a thud in front of him. The businessman trembled when he saw that the mysterious leaper had pointed ears, glowing eyes, and a prominent pointed nose. Without more ado, the businessman turned and fled.

Three girls encountered the same sinister figure on the following night. Again, he made his appearance by bounding over the railings of the cemetery, but on this occasion, he displayed a violent streak. One of the girls had her coat ripped by him, but managed to flee, followed by one of her screaming companions. The remaining member of the trio tried to scream as the unearthly-looking stranger grabbed at her breasts, then began to tear her clothes off. The victim was later found unconscious at the site of the attack by a policeman.²

Bloomsbury (WC1)

Housing the British Museum and the headquarters of London University, and lending its name to the group of writers and artists who dominated creative life in early twentieth-century London, Bloomsbury has been at the centre of the city’s intellectual life for almost 200 years. Furthermore, if London can be said to have a centre of occult activity, then this too surely lies in Bloomsbury.

Deriving its name from the thirteenth-century landowner, William de Blemund, whose Manor lay to the south of what is now Bloomsbury Square, the area became the first part of London to be developed around straight new streets and squares in the late eighteenth century. Hawksmoor’s final London church, St George’s, was completed in 1731 and is
perhaps the most bizarre of all his creations, the steeple in the form of a pyramid and modelled on Pliny’s description of the Mausoleum at Halicarnassus.

Peter Ackroyd has described Bloomsbury as one of those ‘territorial clusters’ which abound in London and in which similar activities are repeated over generations in the same district. And just as he has proclaimed Clerkenwell to be the historical home of radicalism, so too has he identified Bloomsbury with ‘occultism and marginal spiritualism’:

When the great London mythographer William Blake was completing his apprenticeship in Great Queen Street, an elaborate Masonic lodge was being constructed opposite his employer’s workshop. It was the first city headquarters for what was then a controversial occult order of adepts who believed that they had inherited a body of secret knowledge from before the Flood. Before the erection of their great hall they had congregated at the Queen’s Head in Great Queen Street, and, in the same street less than a century later, the occult Order of the Golden Dawn held their meetings. The Theosophical Society met in Great Russell Street while around the corner, opposite Bloomsbury Square, exists the Swedenborg Society. Two occult bookshops can be found in the vicinity, while the Seven Dials close by marks the convergence of astrologers in the seventeenth century. So here again there seems to be a congregation of aligned forces, by coincidence or design, remaining active within the neighbourhood of a very few streets."
Bunhill Fields (City Road, EC1)

Formerly known as the Bone Hill, having become the dumping ground for bones from the charnel house at St Paul’s Churchyard, Bunhill Fields was later to become a cemetery for Nonconformists. In the absence of any evidence to suggest that the land had ever been consecrated, this last surviving City burial ground proved a popular resting place for dissenters. Daniel Defoe, who was interred here in 1731, records that it was also used in the 1660s as the site for the burial of plague victims, describing in his *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722) how ‘many who were infected and near their end, and delirious also, ran wrapped in blankets or rags and threw themselves in and expired there’.4

Lacking any church buildings of its own but with the founder of Methodism, John Wesley’s chapel just opposite, funerals could be conducted here without reference to the Book of Common Prayer. Indeed, when Susanna Wesley was buried here in 1742, it was her son, John, who conducted the service. From 1657 to the final internment in 1854, the remains of some 120,000 individual were crammed into barely four acres of ground, and because it was an obvious target for the ‘Resurrection Men’, hoping to sell fresh bodies to London’s medical institutions, one corner was protected by a spiked gate.5

Amidst the disorderly graves, Defoe’s more celebrated companions include William Blake, his wife Catherine Sophia, John Bunyan and Cromwell’s son-in-law General Fleetwood, a concentration of dissenting voices that led the early nineteenth-century poet Robert Southey to describe Bunhill Fields as the ‘Campo Santo’ of Nonconformity.
A public space since 1864, the land now provides a peaceful spot for City workers to enjoy their lunch. But in recent years Bunhill Fields has also gained something of a reputation as one of London’s most resonant psychogeographical landmarks. Indeed, with Defoe and Blake both retrospectively accorded positions within the psychogeographical canon, Iain Sinclair has identified Bunhill Fields as the spiritual home of London psychogeography:

The triangle of concentration. A sense of this and all the other triangulations of the city: Blake, Bunyan, Defoe, the dissenting monuments in Bunhill Fields. Everything I believe in, everything London can do to you, starts there.6

Camden Town (NW1)

Now one of London’s busiest areas and dominated by its market, Camden Town is named after the first Earl of Camden, who in 1791 sold off plots of land to the east of what is now Camden High Street. At this time the street was dominated by its two inns, the Black Cap, now the site of the tube station, and the Old Mother Red Cap, now the World’s End Pub.7 The latter was built upon the site of the cottage belonging to the seventeenth-century fortune-teller, also known as Mother Damnable, who was to become one of London’s most notorious witches.

Mother Red Cap was born Jennie Bingham, or at least Bingham was her father’s surname, and according to the account of Samuel Palmer in his History of St Pancras (1870), her parents were suspected of black magic and were hanged for killing a girl by witchcraft. Jennie was herself also tried for
the murder of a man she lived with but was acquitted. Strikingly ugly and in possession of the obligatory black cat, Mother Red Cap appears to have willingly conformed to every stereotypical trait expected of a witch, the red bonnet that supplied her nickname accompanied by a grey shawl ‘with black patches which looked at a distance like flying bats’.

According to Palmer, when it became known that she was dying, a huge crowd gathered outside her cottage where it is said that some witnessed the Devil himself go inside, and not come out. The following morning she was found dead beside her fireplace, a teapot beside her ‘full of herbs, drugs and liq-uid, part of which being given to the cat, the hair fell off in two hours, and the cat soon after died’.

Later accounts describe a second Mother Red Cap, who in the nineteenth century became famous as the hostess of an inn, a placard outside of which was later to proclaim:

Old Mother Redcap, according to her tale,  
Lived twenty and a hundred years by drinking this good ale!  
It was her meat, it was her drink, and medicine beside,  
And if she still had drunk this ale, she never would have died.

Clerkenwell (EC1)

Located between King’s Cross and the City, Clerkenwell was formerly a monastic settlement and home to the eleventh-century priory of the Order of the Hospital of St John of Jerusalem, headquarters of the Knights Templar. The sisters at
the convent of St Mary drew their water from a well that became known as the clerk’s well because City students performed a miracle play nearby.\textsuperscript{12} After the Great Fire of 1666, however, many of those made homeless fled here, living conditions gradually worsened and, despite its monastic heritage, Clerkenwell soon became one of London’s most notorious slums. By the nineteenth century, Clerkenwell was famed for its pickpockets, immortalised in Dickens’ \textit{Oliver Twist} (1838), and the district was said to have the highest murder rate in London.

According to Peter Ackroyd, Clerkenwell has its own specific identity imbued with the spirit of radicalism, which, from one generation to the next, attracts radicals and free-thinkers of every stripe: ‘So the secret life of Clerkenwell, like its well, goes very deep. Many of its inhabitants seem to have imbibed the quixotic and fevered atmosphere of the area; somehow by being beyond the bars of the city, strange existences are allowed to flourish.’\textsuperscript{13} As a result, one can trace a path from Wat Tyler’s assault upon the priory of St John in 1381, to the harbouring of the heretical Lollard, Sir John Oldcastle, here, in 1414. By the late sixteenth century, Clerkenwell had become a notorious haven for papists, while in the late eighteenth century the egalitarian London Corresponding Society was established here. This was later followed by an uprising of the radical group the United Englishmen in 1798, and subsequently the Chartist Movement, the National Union of the Working Classes and even the Tolpuddle Martyrs were drawn to Clerkenwell Green as a meeting place. And most famously of all, in 1902 Lenin arrived, editing his revolutionary paper, \textit{Iskra}, in Clerkenwell Green on the site of today’s Marx Memorial
Library. Can such an intense repetition of radical activity be focused upon such a specific location, over such a time frame, and still be simply ascribed to coincidence? Or is Ackroyd right and should we be seeking a more occult explanation?

Gray’s Inn Road (WC1)

Once part of an ancient trackway adjoining the Fleet valley, today Gray’s Inn Road appears to be little more than a nondescript street linking Chancery Lane and King’s Cross. Named after Gray’s Inn, one of the main Inns of Court, Gray’s Inn Road was for many years home to the occult writer and member of the Golden Dawn, Arthur Machen. In the 1890s, Machen lived at No. 4, Verulam Buildings, built in the early nineteenth century as part of the Inn, and it was here that he produced his decadent classic *The Hill of Dreams* (written 1895–7; published 1907). Looking back on this period, Machen was to write:

I became subject at this time to the oddest encounters at every turning, in every quarter of London. Total strangers would accost me on one excuse or another. I have counted ten such unexpected meetings in a day. They would babble confused things, narrate odd adventures, things, I should say, without head or tail or reason, and then sink back into the great deep of the London from which they had emerged. These were utter strangers, and remained such; but there were others whom I knew, who were equally entertaining and extravagant; but were so only for a certain appointed season. Thus, a gentleman, who is now one of the most serious of men, used to meet me at the café de
l’European in Leicester Square and come home with me to my rooms in Verulam Buildings, and there discourse amazing fables, with such eloquence, weightliness, humour, vivacity, that I was convinced of the truth of every word that was uttered.¹⁴

Gray’s Inn Road was, for Machen, emblematic of London itself; on the surface orderly and unremarkable, but in reality possessing a mysterious and exhilarating exoticism:

And it is utterly true that he who cannot find wonder, mystery, awe, the sense of a new world and an undiscovered realm in the places by the Gray’s Inn Road will never find those secrets elsewhere, not in the heart of Africa, not in the fabled hidden cities of Tibet. “The matter of our work is everywhere present”, wrote the old alchemists, and that is the truth. All the wonders lie within a stone’s-throw of King’s Cross Station.¹⁵

Highgate Cemetery (N6)

Once a part of the Forest of Middlesex, Highgate Cemetery was opened by the London Cemetery Company in 1839, one of the ‘Magnificent Seven’ new commercial cemeteries. Now containing more than 50,000 graves, the cemetery’s most famous residents include Michael Faraday, George Eliot, Christina Rossetti and, of course, Karl Marx. More recent additions include Henry Moore, Douglas Adams and Alexander Litvinenko. The western cemetery has at its centrepiece, the Circle of Lebanon, a ring of excavated vaults surrounding an ancient cedar tree. Abandoned since the mid-1960s, this part
of the cemetery was soon overgrown and famously was to become home to the legendary Highgate Vampire (see Chapter Four). The eastern section was opened in 1854 and can be visited daily, and it is here that Karl Marx was buried in 1883. Being Jewish, he was buried in unconsecrated ground and, on the year following his death, some 3,000 supporters gathered to commemorate him. Every 12 March, the day of his death, the Marx Memorial Library holds a ceremony by the grave.16

King’s Cross (WC1)

Given the name Boudicca by Tacitus but renamed Boadicea in the eighteenth century, the history of the queen of the Iceni is shrouded in myth. Having led a revolt against Rome during which she sacked Londinium in AD60, the details of her final battle and the exact manner of her death remain unclear. In Essex it is said to have taken place at Ambresbury Banks, while in Middlesex it is claimed that Stanmore Common marks the spot. In London, however, we can confidently assert that it took place on Battle Bridge Road, behind King’s Cross Station.

During the reign of Queen Victoria, all mention of the atrocities attributed to Boadicea by Roman historians were overlooked in favour of a more heroic interpretation as ‘outraged matron and defender of her people’.17 In 1902, she was immortalised in Thomas Thornycroft’s chariot-borne statue in Victoria Embankment Gardens. However, the precise site of her burial remains contested: the Victorians could not decide whether it was Parliament Hill Fields in Hampstead or beneath King’s Cross Station, but it appears today that the latter myth has won. One question, however, remains. Which
platform marks the spot? The answer, apparently, is either 8 or 13.¹⁸

Nearby, the otherwise unremarkable Vale Royal, off York Way, to the north of King’s Cross, has been enshrined by the poet Aidan Andrew Dun in his epic *Vale Royal* (1995). Dun claims that King’s Cross has exerted a magnetic attraction upon poets and artists down the centuries, from Blake to Chatterton, their visions transforming this neglected area into the centre of London’s spiritual renewal:

Here I stayed bathing in the sunlight myself
until my understanding went beneath the surface
and I was shown the plan of the song Vale Royal:

A song to throw light on the great secret of London,
and the Stance of the Child in the Tree of Life-
the Royal Winged Son of the Liberation;

A song to explain the Golden Quatrain
And the mystical geography of Kings Cross,
A song for all navigators of the night-sea crossing…

Come. A direction into zones of darkness,
a passage to the spaces of discovery begins.
We shall make a voyage to the deep place called Vale Royal.¹⁹

According to Dun, the ‘keystone’ of his poem and the spiritual centre of this re-imagined landscape is St Pancras Old Church. Not to be confused with its larger and newer namesake on the Euston Road, St Pancras Old Church has good
claim to be the earliest Christian church in Britain, its foundation dating from no later than 312 AD. On a mound above the now covered-over River Fleet, St Pancras Old Church was the site of Christian worship well before the arrival of St Augustine in the sixth century. The parish church of St Pancras, until it lost this status to the New St Pancras Church in 1822, today’s church is almost entirely a Victorian construction, having been completely redeveloped in the nineteenth century. The churchyard is home to the grave of the celebrated ‘thief-taker’, Jonathan Wild, as well as Sir John Soane’s distinctive memorial (it was to influence the design of Giles Gilbert Scott’s red telephone kiosk) and it was here that Percy Bysshe Shelley is said to have romanced the future Mary Shelley. In the 1860s the Midland Railway Company built a tunnel beneath the cemetery, employing as a surveyor, the young Thomas Hardy, who was later to describe ‘piteous groans / Half stifled in this jumbled patch / Of wretched memorial stones.’

Lambeth (SE1)

A corruption of ‘loamhithe’ meaning muddy landing place, or perhaps simply an indication that lambs were offloaded at the landing place here, the origins of the name Lambeth remain obscure. Peter Ackroyd has noted the Hebrew connotations of the name, Beth-el being the Hebrew name for a sacred place, suggesting that this might help to explain the evident attraction of Lambeth over the centuries for the many magicians, astrologers and assorted visionaries who have chosen to live here. Amongst these were the experimental philosophers, John Tradescant and Elias Ashmole, whose collection of cu-
riosities included ‘the feathers of a phoenix, salamanders and dragons two inches long’. The Tradescant Museum of Garden History can today be found in St Mary’s Church. The astrologer Francis Moore, whose Old Moore’s Almanack has been published continuously since 1697, lived at the north-east corner of Calcott Alley, while Captain Bubb, who ‘resolved horary questions astrologically’, lived at Lambeth Marsh. Bubb’s contemporary, Simon Forman, the pioneering Elizabethan physician, set up practice here in 1601, beyond the jurisdiction of the medical authorities in the City, and is buried in Lambeth churchyard. Finally, William Blake moved here with his wife in 1790, and was to live for ten years at 13 Hercules Buildings, just east of Lambeth Palace. This was one of the happiest periods of his life and Blake was surrounded by a community of like-minded radicals. It was here that he was to complete many of his most important works. ‘From Lambeth / We began our Foundations; Lovely Lambeth!’, he was to write.

Limehouse (E14)

Just as much of the East End has been subjected to a fictional makeover in recent years, as Hawksmoor, Jack the Ripper and the Freemasons are woven into an all-embracing occult conspiracy, so once was Limehouse the site of a similarly exotic recreation, as writers such as Charles Dickens, Oscar Wilde, and later Thomas Burke and Sax Rohmer, concocted a romantic blend of maritime history and Oriental intrigue. Taking its name from the limekilns that operated here from the mid-fourteenth century, Limehouse became home to London’s first Chinatown, following the opening of the Strangers’ Home for Asiatics in the West India Dock Road in
1856. The community soon gained a reputation for gambling and opium-smoking, activities later depicted by Oscar Wilde in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) and dramatised in the many stories and films featuring Arthur Sarsfield Ward (Sax Rohmer)’s, Fu Manchu, such as *The Mystery of Dr Fu Manchu* (1913). Rohmer was later to claim that Fu Manchu was modelled upon a Chinese man he had glimpsed on Limehouse Causeway one foggy night in 1911. Following the government’s ban on the sale of opium in 1908, however, the opium dens that had so fired the public’s imagination began to disappear and, by the 1930s, the Chinese community was in decline. In reality, the Chinese community had never been that large and the 2001 census recorded that only 2.7 per cent of residents were of Chinese descent.

Of course, no region of London can nowadays claim to hold authentic occult status unless it is home to the obligatory Hawksmoor church. In this instance, Limehouse can boast St Anne’s, built between 1714 and 1730. The steeple, whose design evokes a ship’s topmast and crow’s nest, was for more than 200 years the first London landmark to be glimpsed by those arriving by sea, with sea captains setting their chronometers by its clock. The church was gutted by fire in 1850 and bombed during the Second World War before being restored by Julian Harrap between 1983 and 1993. The mysterious pyramid in the church graveyard was planned originally to be placed atop the spire.

**London Stone (Cannon Street, EC4)**

According to the medieval proverb, ‘So long as the stone of Brutus is safe, so long shall London flourish.’ And today,
Brutus Stone, or London Stone as it has come to be known, is securely, if rather incongruously, incarcerated at number 111 Cannon Street behind an iron grille in the wall of a sportswear shop. The precise origins of this stone, which has been within the City walls since at least 1198, remain obscure. One tale suggests that Brutus brought it with him from Troy, but it is now commonly believed to be a Roman milestone, possibly the very stone from which all distances were measured. Elsewhere, it is suggested that this stone is of Druidic significance, perhaps marking the mystical centre of the British Isles, or more fancifully still, the stone from which King Arthur pulled Excalibur. If this is the case, then visually the stone is something of a disappointment, barely two feet high, badly weathered and unmarked apart from a pair of grooves to the top.

The stone was originally on the other side of the street against the wall of Wren’s St Swithin’s Church, until this was bombed in 1941. The stone survived unscathed, as one would expect, from a totem employed since medieval times to ensure the city’s safety. An important landmark for many centuries, this block of Clipsham limestone was used, according to the antiquary John Stow, as a place where debtors and creditors could meet to settle their disputes, and it was here, most famously, that Holinshed records the arrival of Jack Cade in 1450 as he led his rebellion from Kent in protest against the King’s taxes, striking the stone with his sword and declaring himself to be ‘Lord of this city’. This moment was later satirised by Shakespeare in Henry VI Part II (1591): ‘Here, sitting upon London-Stone, I charge and command that, of the city’s cost, the pissing-conduit run nothing but claret wine this first year of our reign.’ While in his Jerusalem (1820),
Blake writes, ‘At length he sat on London Stone and heard Jerusalem’s voice.’

Ludgate (EC4)

According to legend, Brutus, grandson of the Trojan king Aeneas, built a city, New Troy, on Ludgate Hill in around 1100 BC. This was rebuilt by King Lud in 113 BC and renamed Caerlud (the city of Lud), the name later corrupted to Caerlundein, Londinium and finally London.\(^{28}\) Demolished in 1760, Ludgate stood to the west of Wren’s St Martin-within-Ludgate and is believed to have been built by King Lud in 66 BC, who supposedly was buried beneath the entrance. Although it is equally possible that the origin of the name is in fact ‘Flodgate’, and that it was built to prevent the Fleet from flooding the city.\(^{29}\)

Mithraeum (Temple of Mithras, Queen Victoria Street, EC4)

Excavated in 1954, as the ground was prepared for the building of the office block Bucklersbury House, the Temple of Mithras is a Roman temple dating from around AD 240. The existence of the temple had first been suggested by the discovery in 1889 of a relief displaying the Roman god of light, Mithras, ritually slaying a bull. Dedicated to Ulpius Silvanus, a veteran of the 2\(^{\text{nd}}\) legion of Augustus, the discovery of this relief confirmed suspicions about the existence of such a temple; the worship of Mithras had spread from Persia before becoming an all-male cult particularly popular amongst soldiers.\(^{30}\)
Originally built on the east bank of the now covered-over River Walbrook, the whole site was uprooted and moved down the road to Temple Court, on the south side of Queen Victoria Street, where the remains of the temple foundations have been reassembled for display to the public. Measuring some 60 feet in length and 26 feet wide, in its day the temple would have been both the largest and grandest of its rivals. It would have been kept dark to act as a reminder to initiates of the cave in which Mithras, ‘God of the Unconquered Sun’, had slain the sacred bull from whose blood all life flowed.

Knowledge of the cult is limited by virtue of the vow of secrecy by which its members were bound, but, having begun in Persia in the first century BC, the worship of Mithras was conducted in specially constructed caves called *mithraea*, with applicants required to undergo a series of harsh physical and mental ordeals. ‘Thereafter only a life of abstinence, obedience, courage, fortitude and vigilance would enable them to rise through all seven grades of initiation.’

Artefacts from the temple can today be found in the Museum of London, but there are plans for the temple to be relocated to its original location beside the ancient Walbrook River, as part of the demolition of Bucklersbury House and the creation of the new Walbrook Square development.

Mortlake (SW14)

According to the Domesday Book, the name Mortlake, or Mortelage, does not mean lake of the dead, but rather more prosaically, it probably derives from the Old English words ‘mort’, a young salmon, and ‘lacu’, a small stream. In Elizabethan times the village of Mortlake consisted of little
more than a few riverside houses on a single street, but it was in one such house that the alchemist, geographer and mathematician John Dee lived. Described by Peter Ackroyd as the ‘Magus of the Thames’, Dee lived in a house by the waterside, just to the west of the church, and it was here that he claimed to have been visited by the angel Uriel, who, appearing at the window of his study, presented him with a translucent stone with which he could summon other angels and converse with them.33

Dee first moved to his mother’s cottage in the 1560s and proceeded to build a laboratory to house his occult equipment alongside a library that was reputed to be the one of the finest in the country. Elizabeth I is reported to have visited him here on at least two occasions and Mortlake soon became established as a centre for occult activity. Dee was subsequently to move to the Continent, and on his return to Mortlake in 1589 he was to find his laboratory destroyed and his library ransacked. He died in 1608 and was buried in St Mary’s churchyard, where, in 1715, he was to be joined by the astrologer and writer of the celebrated almanac, John Partridge. Today, the precise location of Dee’s grave is unknown, and his memorial is the block of council flats next door to the church, John Dee House.

Spitalfields (E1)

Situated between Shoreditch and Aldgate, and successively known as Petty France, Little Jerusalem and, most recently, Banglatown, the district of Spitalfields takes its name from the hospital and priory of St Mary Spital, founded in 1197 and dissolved in 1538. Spitalfields market was established by
Royal Charter in 1682, and shortly afterwards the area was to become popular with refugees fleeing religious persecution in France, these Huguenot exiles helping to expand the existing silk-weaving industry. Huguenots subsequently gave way to Jews from Amsterdam, and later Russia, Irish immigrants working on the London docks and, since the 1960s, the Bengali community.

Dominating the skyline over Spitalfields, Hawksmoor’s Christ Church was consecrated in 1729 and its 225-foot spire ensures its place as the most striking of his six remaining London churches. Gutted in the nineteenth century and largely neglected in the twentieth, the church closed in 1957 only to become a haven for meths drinkers. Finally, in 1996, renovations began and by 2004 the church had been restored in line with Hawksmoor’s original vision. Enshrined within the fictions of Iain Sinclair, Peter Ackroyd and Alan Moore, Christ Church has since become symbolic of the East End as a site of occult conspiracy and intrigue, a position partly attributable to the church’s proximity to the sites of the Ripper murders of 1888, whose notoriety have prevented the area from quite escaping its Victorian legacy of fog-bound menace. In addition, Spitalfields has had to contend with an extensive history of social commentary characterising it as a place of unremitting poverty and degradation, a perspective best articulated by Jack London in his *The People of the Abyss* (1903): ‘In the shadow of Christ’s Church I saw a sight I never wish to see again… a mass of miserable and distorted humanity, the sight of which would have impelled Doré to more diabolical flights of fancy than he ever succeeded in achieving.’

On nearby Princelet Street, now gentrified but once at the heart of Spitalfield’s nineteenth-century Jewish community,
can be found the former home of David Rodinsky. Rodinsky, who lived at number 19, was the subject of Rodinsky’s Room (2000) by Rachel Lichtenstein and Iain Sinclair, in which they pieced together the life of a man who appeared to have vanished off the face of the earth, leaving behind him his locked room, a time-capsule untouched since the late 1960s. Rodinsky, it turns out, had lived there since the forties, acting as a caretaker to the disused property before abruptly disappearing, only to die in a Surrey asylum. The building housed a synagogue, in use until the 1960s, and today is home to the fledgling Museum of Immigration and Settlement.

Stoke Newington (N16)

Situated to the north-west of Hackney, Stoke Newington has been a nonconformist community since the seventeenth century, providing a haven for dissenters and radicals unable to congregate within the city. Residents have included John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, the philosopher John Stuart Mill, writers Anna Sewell and Joseph Conrad, and most famously, two writers who have both contributed to London’s occult identity, Daniel Defoe and Edgar Allan Poe.

The writer and Nonconformist Daniel Defoe, whose burial site, Bunhill Fields, appears here in an earlier entry, married a girl from Newington Green in 1684 and tried to raise civet cats to make perfume. He lived briefly at 95 Stoke Newington Church Street and it was here that he wrote Robinson Crusoe (1719).

Born in Boston in 1809, Poe’s foster parents brought him to England in 1815 and he was educated in Stoke Newington between 1817 and 1820, attending the Reverend John
Bransby’s Manor House School. In his short story ‘William Wilson’ (1839), Poe describes Stoke Newington as ‘a misty looking village of England, where there were a vast number of gigantic and gnarled trees’.36 Poe’s semi-autobiographical story was based upon his time at school in Stoke Newington and introduces the theme of the double with which so much of his writing is preoccupied.

Poe’s recollection of Stoke Newington as an occult locale was to find a further endorsement in Arthur Machen’s short story ‘N’. Certainly the most intriguing of all the fictional representations of Stoke Newington, Machen’s story depicts an enchanted realm which appears only occasionally and only to those attuned to its presence. And, if such a place does indeed exist, speculates Peter Ackroyd, commenting on Machen’s story, then perhaps it is to be found in Abney Park beside Stoke Newington High Street.37

Pioneering in its combination of a non-denominational cemetery with a public arboretum, Abney Park Cemetery was laid out in 1840 on unconsecrated ground. And, amidst this disorderly conjunction of untamed woodland and overgrown statuary, one can find the graves of Catherine and William Booth, the founders of the Salvation Army, alongside many of the most notable members of the Nonconformist community. The cemetery company went into liquidation in the 1970s and the park passed to the local council. With no remaining burial rights the land has been left untended, nature gradually reclaiming the landscaped gardens and the tombs themselves to create one of London’s eeriest green spaces.
Tyburn (W2)

London’s most famous gallows lay in the district of Tyburnia, at what is today the junction of Bayswater Road and Edgware Road. Colloquially known as the ‘Tyburn Tree’ or ‘the Three-Legged Mare’, these large triangular gallows were able to hang 21 victims at a time. In 1678, however, in an event attributed in some quarters to the work of evil spirits, the gallows collapsed. According to the anonymous author of a pamphlet entitled *The Tyburn Ghost: or, the Strange Downfall of the Gallows* (1678), the spirits of those who had died on the gallows were responsible, reporting that ‘there was seen last Tuesday-evening a Spirit sitting on one of the Cross-beams with its Neck awry, making a strange noise like a Scrietch-Owl; which ‘tis supposed did afterwards demolish all the venerable Fabrick’.

The gallows were, of course, replaced and continued to dispatch their victims effectively until they were moved to Newgate in 1783. Between 1196 and 1783 it has been estimated that some 50,000 individuals were hanged here, amongst them 105 Catholic martyrs. And it was as a shrine to these martyrs that a house was acquired at 12 Hyde Park Place, which in 1902 became Tyburn Convent, home to an order of Benedictine nuns called the Sisters of the Adoration of the Sacred Heart of Jesus of Montmartre. Today, the Convent is home to 25 nuns, who, as part of an enclosed order, remain within this community, only leaving if sick or dying. Beneath three linked buildings on the site, there is a crypt ‘containing bones and other relics of the martyrs, for whose souls the nuns – traditionally dressed in black veil, white guimpe around the neck, a full-length habit and a white...
cowl during services – pray seven times each day. The public can join them for Mass, but remain seated behind a grille.’ According to the historian David Long, the nuns spend their days praying and studying, while to relax they play snooker and scrabble. Indeed, in one of the most unlikely sporting events ever to be staged in the capital, Long reports that in 1989, ‘the order paid host to the Nuns’ World Snooker Championship, raising around £50,000 for the renovations of its buildings in an event which has now become an annual fixture. ‘Playing snooker’, says Vatican Archbishop Luigi Barbarito, ‘gives you firm hands and helps to build up character.’

Wapping (E1)

Recently the subject of major waterfront redevelopment, Wapping is now barely recognisable as the site of what was once one of the world’s busiest ports. Derived from an Old English place name meaning ‘the settlement of Waeppa’s people’, today Wapping occupies the isolated southern peninsula of the East End and is home to several sites of particular occult interest.

Lying at the junction of Cable Street and Cannon Street Road, Hawksmoor’s St George-in-the-East was built between 1714 and 1729 and features a tower with an octagonal lantern with four ‘pepper-pot’ turrets at the corners. Bombed during the Blitz, the interior of St George’s was largely redesigned by Arthur Bailey and now houses a modern church within Hawksmoor’s original façade. Iain Sinclair worked in the churchyard here in the 1970s where he was inspired to write *Lud Heat* (1975), while Peter Ackroyd’s *Hawksmoor* (1985) also
places the church within a larger occult pattern. But, in reality, the church requires little fictional support for its own occult history.

Until it was subsumed into the Borough of Stepney and later Tower Hamlets, St George’s lent its name to the surrounding parish, an area that has acted historically as an extraordinary occult and criminal nexus. It was in 1811 that the notorious Ratcliffe Highway murders took place nearby on what is today the Highway. The first victims, the Marr family, were interred in St George’s, while the corpse of the man convicted of the crime, John Williams, was dragged through the streets of Wapping on a cart before being buried (with a stake through his heart) beneath the junction of Cable Street and Cannon Street Road.

In 1859 the church was the setting for ‘No Popery’ riots when it was discovered that the vicar, Bryan King, had cofounded a secret brotherhood for priests called the Society of the Holy Cross. Parishioners threw rubbish at the altar and brought in barking dogs to disrupt the services. The church was to close for six weeks.41

Lying between Cable Street to the north, and the Highway to the south, today Wellclose Square is little more than a characteristically unattractive piece of post-war redevelopment, and shows no evidence of once having been east London’s most desirable address. Born of Wren’s grandiose plans for London’s redevelopment following the Great Fire of 1666, Wellclose Square was built around Caius Gabriel Cibber’s Danish church and soon became the centre for the Scandinavian community. Swedenborg lodged in nearby Prince’s Square (today Swedenborg Gardens) before moving to Wellclose Square in 1766 and it was here that he would
have been neighbour to Rabbi Falk, the notorious Cabbalist. One wonders what regulars at the Kings Arms, the square’s Swedish-run pub, would have made of their conversation.

Notes

1. See London Cemeteries at http://www.londoncemeteries.co.uk/?c=95
2. See Tom Slemen, Who was Spring-Heeled Jack? at http://www.geocities.com/Area51/Meteor/3602/springy.html
6. Sinclair, Lights Out, p. 34.
25. Willey, p. 293.
26. Willey, p. 293.
32. Willey, p. 330.
35. Willey, p. 473.
39. Long, p. 16.
40. Long, p. 16.
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