

# The Outcast Dead

by Paul Slade

## Contents

Introduction	2
Chapter 1: The Romans	4
Chapter 2: Arriving at the vigil	7
Chapter 3: Laying siege	10
Chapter 4: Samhain at the gates	12
Chapter 5: Birth of the Liberty	15
Chapter 6: Emily's plaque	23
Chapter 7: The Black Death	27
Chapter 8: The Invisible Gardener	34
Chapter 9: Farewell to the stews	38
Chapter 10: The Southwark Mysteries	43
Chapter 11: Bardic Bankside	45
Chapter 12: Going underground	51
Chapter 13: Puritans and plagues	56
Chapter 14: Crossbones Girl	61
Chapter 15: The stink industries	64
Chapter 16: Say my name	66
Chapter 17: Resurrection men	69
Chapter 18: John Crow's megaphone	75
Chapter 19: Seeking closure	78
Chapter 20: What happens next?	89
Appendices	92
Sources & footnotes	117

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This book first appeared on [www.PlanetSlade.com](http://www.PlanetSlade.com).

## Introduction

*“I have heard ancient men of good credit report that these single women were forbidden the rites of the church so long as they continued their sinful life and were excluded from Christian burial. And therefore, there was a plot of ground, called the single woman’s churchyard, appointed for them far from the parish church.”*

- **John Stow’s Survey of London, 1598.**

*“Sleep well, you winged spirits of intimate joy.”*

- **Note taped to Cross Bone’s fence, 2011.**

“Where to, mate?” the cabbie asked as I settled in my seat.

“To London’s outlaw borough,” I thought. To the sanctuary sought by every runaway Roman slave; to the Liberty of the Clink where London’s own jurisdiction is left far behind. To the home of whores, killers and cut-purses throughout our capital’s dark history. To the city’s dumping-ground for its desperate and its despised; to the streets where Victorian industrialists placed their filthiest factories; to the site of London’s wildest acid house parties of the 1990s.

Where to? “To Shakespeare’s London,” I thought. To the site where he and his friends built the original Globe theatre with stolen timbers; to the taverns and brothels where he found his models for John Falstaff and Doll Tearsheet. To the broiling nightlife of bear pits and dogfights, where the young Bard himself was dragged into court for threatening another man’s life. To the home of so much great London theatre today.

Where to? “To Shard City,” I thought. To the latest tumour spawned by London’s financial district, where Renzo Piano’s jagged office block is now the tallest building between Guangzhou and Chicago. To the equally soulless developments coming in its wake. To a place of female power, now overshadowed by the biggest prick in Europe; to a giant shiv waved in the face of London’s poor.

Where to? “To a patch of unquiet graves,” I thought. To the site where London’s paupers were buried in unconsecrated ground; to a cemetery built for the Bishop of Winchester’s licensed whores, but later annexed for outcast burials of every kind. To graves which were routinely emptied after only a few months to make room for the newly dead; to the shallow pits where victims of London’s regular plague epidemics were hastily consigned. To a burial ground where London’s most notorious gang of corpse-snatchers knew they’d always find easy meat.

Where to? “To a modern shrine,” I thought. To the spot where a shamanic local writer has led over 100 monthly vigils to honour its humble dead; to a site which now attracts 50,000 visitors a year. To a pair of gates which Britain’s prostitutes have made a memorial to their own; to perhaps the only place in Britain where the murdered women of Ipswich, Bradford and Nottingham are given their due. To the display of a thousand fluttering white ribbons carrying the names of three centuries’ dead; to a patch of

wasteland made beautiful by an invisible gardener. To one of London's most neglected, yet most potent landmarks.

“Where to?” he asked again. “Redcross Way,” I replied. “It’s in Southwark.”

## Chapter 1: The Romans.

**Southwark** got its first brothels when the invading Roman army arrived in 43AD. The Iron Age settlement once sited there had long since been abandoned, leaving nothing but a patch of swampy ground on the south bank of the Thames.

General Aulus Plautius marched his troops straight here from their landing point on the Kent coast, a distance of about 63 miles, meeting little or no resistance along the way. Forced to halt by the river, they camped opposite what is now Cheapside, where a network of tracks branched out towards every corner of the island. It was there, on the river's north bank, that Britain's defenders had chosen to make their stand. Plautius ordered his engineers to build a platoon bridge at the relatively narrow, shallow spot where Southwark Bridge now stands and this was quickly done. The Romans made short work of the British fighters waiting at Cheapside, replaced their original pontoon bridge with a permanent wooden structure and set about expanding their Southwark camp into something more like a small town.

“At the bridgehead, they established their commissariat and stores, because Southwark – and not London – would have been their resistance base if the campaign had gone wrong,” Ephraim Burford writes in his 1976 book *The Bishop's Brothels*. “At least a cohort must have been stationed there and at that period a cohort comprised between 600 and 1,000 men, to which must be added the supporting establishment and the camp followers. There would have been at least 2,000 people in that settlement at any one time.” Those camp followers included a good number of Roman prostitutes, who set up shop in the new timber and thatch buildings provided just off the military highway. Any army camp of that size would have produced ample demand for the girls' services and this grew further once the Romans had established landing docks nearby to disembark new soldiers and unload supplies. <sup>(1)</sup>

Within seven years of arrival, the Romans had already pushed their British frontier all the way to a diagonal line between the Humber and Severn estuaries – now marked by the old Fosse Way. It was also around this time that Roman merchants first built a town on the Thames' north bank, surrounding it with defensive earthworks and christening the place Londinium. Tacitus, the Roman historian, tells us that the Londinium of 61AD was already “much frequented by merchants and trading vessels”.

By 75AD, Southwark had grown into a large suburb, snaking out a string of taverns along the access roads to its south. Throughout the Roman occupation, these were the busiest roads in the country, lined all the way to the coast with grog shops and inns, each one with a resident whore on 24-hour duty. As its population grew, Southwark shipped in slave girls from all over the Empire to keep its brothels staffed. Evidence of busy landing docks and slave markets from this period has been found all along the Thames' north bank opposite Southwark at sites such as Queenhithe, the Tower and Billingsgate. <sup>(2)</sup>

A steady supply of new girls was essential to replace the many prostitutes who Southwark simply worked to death. “Once sold, these slaves had no rights whatsoever,” Burford says. “Each one would spend the rest of her life on her back, day and night, submitting to every sexual vagary forced upon her by exigent men, until she died. If she were not lucky enough to be bought by some admirer for his personal pleasures, she would die of exhaustion or disease by the age of 30.”

Disease was a problem for the Roman army too, if only because it didn't want its men too clap-ridden to fight. In an age where condoms and penicillin were still centuries away, however, there was nothing much their commanders could do to combat venereal disease but order every soldier to give his genitals a good scrub every now and again. The only other precaution available was to ensure that any girl who was obviously diseased be banned from further whoring and that responsibility fell to a band of civic officials called the aediles.

Every Roman city had a team of these men, who were charged with keeping a register of all the town's licensed prostitutes. They financed this operation by collecting a licence fee and taxes from every girl registered and from every licensed brothel-keeper too. Once she'd got a licence, the girl could choose a name to work under, tell the aedile what type of clients she planned to serve and then hang up a shingle outside displaying her prices. The licence gave her a measure of protection under Roman law, but in return she had to succumb to the aedile's regular health inspections and agree never to dress in a way which concealed her profession. Although local pimps and procurers were free to become Roman citizens, that privilege was not extended to the girls themselves.<sup>(3)</sup>

Southwark's busy brothels soon produced a satellite trade of rough-arse taverns, sleazy gambling joints and every other form of low-life entertainment. These, in turn, pulled petty thieves, gangsters, killers and conmen to the area, partly for the opportunities it offered them and partly because they felt safer there than in respectable Londinium itself. Runaway slaves and other fugitives flocked to Southwark too. "The very nature of the surrounding land – marshy, dank and uninhabited – made it a natural hiding place and refuge," Burford writes. "It was regarded as part of the pomerium of London. This was a swathe of 'no man's land' outside the walls of Roman cities, which was deliberately left clear so that approaching enemies could quickly be spotted and dealt with."

In placing their brothels outside the city wall, with a river segregating them from more respectable neighbourhoods, the Romans were following a familiar pattern from home. Rome's own red light district, the Trastevere, was sited just across the Tiber from the city itself and named to reflect precisely that fact: Trastevere translates as "on the other side of the Tiber".

There were other amusements on offer in Southwark too – perhaps including an arena for the Roman games. Archaeologists have found evidence of a female gladiator's funeral feast in what's now Great Dover Street and the grave goods buried with this woman suggest she was a worshipper of Isis. Another team of archaeologists found a Roman jug inscribed "London, at the Temple of Isis" in the Thames river bed near what's now Southwark Cathedral, which Burford believes was used in the regular "days of drinking" her worship required. Isis cults persisted in England until 350AD and these two finds suggest she was widely worshipped in Roman Southwark.<sup>(4)</sup>

And so, it seems, was her son Horus, who the Romans called Harpocrates. A small silver statue of this Egypto-Roman god, often depicted with a penis twice the height of his body, was fished out of the Thames near the Southwark end of London Bridge in 1825. Brothels throughout the Roman Empire displayed his picture as a means of spurring on the clients. Just as Isis worship encouraged regular bouts of heavy drinking, Harpocrates' followers were expected to indulge in the wildest displays of sexual licence. All the relics I've mentioned here date from the first or second centuries AD, long before Christianity gained any foothold in Britain. The pantheistic Romans had many gods to choose from and Southwark's selection of Isis and Harpocrates tells us the locals have always put drinking and sex very high on their own list of priorities.<sup>(5)</sup>

By 150AD, the Romans' army base had moved to a new home in London's northwest suburbs, leaving Southwark's brothels to serve a civilian clientele instead.

Burford describes their new customers as “freedmen, petty traders, travellers, lower officials, even slaves – and, of course, criminal elements using whorehouses for nefarious purposes.”

Rome’s soldiers had dominated Southwark for little more than a century, but even in that short time, they laid down the pattern of everything we’d see in the borough for the next two millennia: licensed brothels, frantic commerce, boozy travellers, disease, low-life entertainment and a dual status as both London’s sanctuary and its dumping ground. All these elements will surface again and again as we proceed through Southwark’s history, and all their seeds were planted by Roman hands.

## Chapter 2: Arriving at the vigil.

The cabbie dropped me off where Redcross Way meets the far wider and busier Southwark Street. A broad Victorian railway bridge passes overhead exactly where these two roads meet, casting everything beneath it into permanent shadow. Redcross Way's narrow entrance – just wide enough for a single car – is topped by a brick archway helping to support the bridge and flanked by two banks of coloured lights which blink forlornly through the gloom. <sup>(6)</sup>

It was a cold, foggy October evening, already dark and that month's vigil at the gates of Cross Bones was due to start at 7:00pm. I had about ten minutes to spare as I entered Redcross Way and I could see a dozen or so winter-coated pilgrims already huddled round the gates, waiting for something to happen. They were mostly women, mostly middle-class and looked like the sort of respectable crowd you might find at a *Guardian* newspaper event or an upmarket crafts fair. Behind them, The Shard thrust skyward, its tip sheathed in fog. <sup>(7)</sup>

People began decorating this old burial ground's gates with candles, ribbons and other offerings in October 1998, when John Constable led the first of his Halloween processions to the site. Constable himself had discovered the gates only two years earlier when, consumed in a frenzied night's writing at his home nearby, he realised he was no longer alone. He'd been writing that night in his persona as John Crow, a trickster poet figure who first appeared in Constable's 1995 Edinburgh Fringe show *I Was An Alien Sex God*. "When I wrote as John Crow, I was writing in a slightly different persona and going places I wouldn't normally go," he told me a few days after the October vigil. "By about 11:00 o'clock that night, I was in full spate as John Crow, this sort of slightly rogue prophet holding forth. And then..."

And then he sensed another presence in the room. "It was as if a fleshed-out, fully-formed character walked into the room and started telling me her history, in my head, in verse," Constable told me. "I was quite scared by it. I thought I'd pushed the boat out a bit too far that night and we weren't coming back. So I started writing it all down." <sup>(8, 9)</sup>

The medieval prostitutes who worked the streets of Southwark had the Bishop of Winchester as their landlord and hence were nicknamed Winchester Geese. These were the women first consigned to Cross Bones and Constable quickly came to think of his visitor as a voice for them and all the others buried there. What else could he do but name her in their honour: she was The Goose. He'd read some of the Winchester Geese's history while researching Southwark for another project, but never heard it told in such urgent and vivid terms as he did that night.

"It was things I knew, but they seemed to be coming out in a much more radical form," he later wrote. "With this narrator, with her own voice. The Cross Bones graveyard reference – 'And well we know how the carrion crow / doth feast in our Cross Bones graveyard' – was like the hidden part of the jigsaw. I was seeing all these visions of places and, for that, when I wrote it down, the vision was of a graveyard – but I was thinking pirates, really. I pictured The Goose with a knife in her garter in case one of her johns got out of order. Later, I thought it was as if she'd deliberately kept one card hidden to impress me." <sup>(10)</sup>

Most people didn't know Cross Bones existed in 1996 and Constable is adamant he'd never heard of it either. But he's content to let others interpret his experience

however they will. My own suggestion was that he must have already known about Cross Bones long before The Goose's visit, but that the information had since slipped so far to the back of his mind that he no longer knew he possessed it. Surely The Goose was simply a product of his own brain, teased into an altered state by the John Crow process, finding a way to haul the burial ground's name back into his conscious awareness? "I can't say I'd never unconsciously seen some little footnote in a paper," he replied. "Whether that's true or not, I just don't know. What I know is that, the way it presented itself to me that night, was as a completely unknown thing. When I wrote those lines, I saw it almost as The Goose trying to scare me. And I was scared: it was a frightening night."

What's undeniable is that *something* happened that night and whether we call it a ghostly vision, a resurfaced memory or a neurological event, Constable's life would never be the same again. The two birds – Goose and Crow – laced their wings together on the first night they met, they've flown in tandem ever since and many changes in the concrete, tangible world around us have directly followed from that.

By now it was the small hours of the morning, but The Goose hadn't finished with Constable yet. As her fragments of poetry accumulated, he realised they were building towards a verse journey through the streets of Southwark, with The Goose leading John Crow through the Borough's dark history. It was obvious what he had to do next. "By now, it was after midnight and this was a rough area, but I felt completely fearless," Constable told me. "Maybe it was The Goose saying to me 'Don't worry, dearie: we're the scariest thing on the street tonight'. So we went on this long walk."

Southwark in 1996 was a far more dangerous place than it is today, where taxi drivers often refused to go and the police warned residents against showing their cash in the street. Redevelopment of the area had hardly begun, and its poorly lit alleyways still led through a maze of derelict warehouses and Dickensian railway arches, in neighbourhoods which Victorian reformers had reckoned among the worst in London. Progressing first through the local history sites Constable did know – The Cathedral, Chaucer's Tabard Inn, the site of Shakespeare's original Globe Theatre – The Goose eventually led him up from Marshalsea Road, under the trees towards a fenced patch of anonymous waste ground in Redcross Way. "I remember walking up there having a very particular, perhaps a Blakean, sense of eternity," Constable said. "That was the place where I felt 'I'm John Crow, walking in eternity – now.'"

"We ended up at the gates of Cross Bones. I didn't know what they were, but it seemed like there were these voices coming through – they started singing. There were lots of cans rattling, papers blowing. There were all these sounds that were making me very jumpy. And somehow, out of that, *John Crow's Riddle* almost sang itself there at the gate. I was kind of singing it, but not knowing where it came from. So I wrote more at the gates and I carried on walking and I came home and I wrote more. Finally, I went to sleep at dawn."

I knew the bare bones of this story already as I entered Redcross Way last October, taking in the crowd outside the gates, the office workers arriving at The Boot & Flogger pub directly opposite and the two old charity schools which lay ahead of me towards the Union Street corner. I'd been here five or six times before and watched the vertical bars of the tall, locked gates become more and more crammed with offerings of all kinds: costume jewellery, crocheted flowers, dream catchers, poems, scraps of ribbon from a child's dressing-up box, a silk stocking. All those objects were still in place, plus a thousand more besides. <sup>(11)</sup>

I didn't know it at the time, but that night's event was to be the 101<sup>st</sup> vigil held at Cross Bones and the last one its celebrants planned before taking a break from the



custom. Perhaps that's why they'd made a special effort to decorate the gates, hanging a long string of red and gold bunting showing Our Lady of Guadalupe along the top of the gates and a truly beautiful quilted portrait of her surrounded by skulls and roses next to the graffitied wooden fence. A row of flickering candles in Glass jars ran along the gates' base, next to a child's cheap bracelet, a bird-shaped wicker basket and a bottle of Gordon's gin. Through the bars behind the Guadalupe quilt, I could see Cross Bones Mary, the battered Madonna statue standing guard just inside the site entrance.

The crowd had grown to about 50 people by 6:55pm, when a tall, white-haired man wearing a long velvet cloak and beads round his neck strolled up. John Crow had arrived and we were ready to start our ritual. <sup>(12)</sup>

## Chapter 3: Laying siege

The Roman Empire ended its persecution of Christians in about 313AD, a century or so before its soldiers abandoned Britain altogether. Christianity here slowly grew in numbers and visibility throughout the fourth century, but was still very much a minority faith when the Romans went home in 410AD. Most Britons continued worshipping the old pagan gods, who seemed to serve them perfectly well.

The historian Mary Boast believes that the disruption following Rome's withdrawal may have pushed crowded, anarchic Southwark to the point where it became unsafe for civilian occupation. Presumably, that means the various local warlords were fighting to see who could gain control of the area, whose bridge access alone made it well worth having. Any lingering residents risked becoming collateral damage, so only those with no other choice would have stuck around.

Evidence from this era is very scarce, but it does seem that Southwark had been at least partially tamed by about 550AD, when the seven Saxon kingdoms known as the Heptarchy began their 200-year rule. The Saxons were an oral rather than a written culture, but we do have references to bustling wharves and trading docks along the Thames during their time. By 850AD, Christianity had tightened its grip enough for the Bishop of Winchester – later canonised as St Swithun - to build a monastery at Southwark, near the southern end of the bridge. This building later became the nunnery of St Mary Overie, the first in a string of transformations which made it more and more important to the borough's life as time went on.

In 871AD, the invading Vikings took occupation of London, giving the brothels that still flourished in Southwark a whole new clientele. "The Danes would certainly have had regard for the maintenance of any institutions of pleasurable convenience on Bankside during the lulls in the fighting," Burford writes. "The customers' nationality did not concern the whores or their masters. It was the cash that counted."

From the girls' point of view, in fact, the new clients were something of an improvement. John of Wallingford's *Chronicle*, written in the 12<sup>th</sup> Century, describes the Danish mercenaries stationed in East Anglia when London was over-run. "[They] caused much trouble to the natives of the land," he writes. "For they were wont, after the fashion of their country, to comb their hair every day, to bathe every Saturday, to change their garments often and set off their persons with many such frivolous devices. In this manner, they laid siege to the virtue of married women and persuaded even the daughters of the nobles to be their concubines."

The Danish occupation of London ended in 886AD, leaving King Alfred with the job of rebuilding the city they'd sacked. It was his renewal of the dilapidated wooden wharves and bank reinforcements in Southwark which gave the area its modern name. Alfred's "Suthringa Geweorche" (Surrey Works), became "Sudwra" (South works) and finally "Southwark".<sup>(13)</sup>

By the year 1000, there was already a Saxon mint in Southwark, suggesting again that some order had been restored. As a recognised borough – that is to say, a fortified town in its own right – Southwark remained independent from London, with the right to make its own laws. There were other boroughs scattered around London too, but Southwark had a military importance to the city which put it in a category of its own. It became known not merely as a borough, but The Borough – a nickname Londoners still use for the area today.

Southwark's people took their independence seriously and none more so than Godwin, Earl of Wessex, who owned a lot of property in the town. In 1052, he mounted a challenge against King Edward the Confessor, anchoring his ships off Bankside in a show of force. But the Anglo Saxon Chronicles tell us that "his band continually diminished the longer he stayed" and it's thought that's because they were unable to resist slipping off to Southwark's nearby whorehouses. The rebellion succeeded in forcing Edward to end Godwin's exile abroad, but got no further than that.

One of Godwin's beefs with Edward had been the Normans' increasing influence in the English court, which culminated in William the Conqueror's invasion of 1066. William's cavalry chased the remnants of King Harold's fleeing army all the way to London, where the city's fortifications forced them to turn back. Frustrated, the invaders burnt the churches and inns along Borough High Street, but seem to have left the riverside brothels untouched. Like the Vikings before them, perhaps they felt these establishments were too good to waste. <sup>(14, 15)</sup>

One account has it that William himself owned brothels in Rouen, a business venture that carried no hint of stigma at the time. European royalty and nobles in every country thought nothing of renting property on their land to brothel-masters and were happy to openly take the income this produced. The other major landlord of that era was the Christian Church, which did exactly the same thing. But raking in the cash these rents provided did not stop the bishops simultaneously condemning anyone whose sexual morality they found wanting. "It was the Norman Conquest that really cemented the power of the church in England," the BBC website says. "The medieval period in Britain is really a story of how Christianity came to dominate the lives of the ordinary people. From the cradle to the grave and every stage in between, the Church could be your ally or your foe and ultimately your passport to heaven or hell." <sup>(16)</sup>

Marriage then had little to do with romantic notions of love, but was a hard-headed calculation between two families who each believed they had something to gain from the union. It was understood that young men must be permitted to sow their wild oats, but essential this didn't endanger the family's plans. "If you were a young buck or a nobleman – an alderman's son, say – you couldn't have a sexual relationship with your social equals for the simple reason that it would cause a scandal if it came out," the Southwark historian Patricia Dark told me. "Obviously, if you got married, that would be fine. But if you get married to the girl next door because you've knocked her up, you probably aren't going to be generating any advantage for your family. Whereas, if you take your hormones off to Southwark and deal with your needs that way, you still have the freedom to enact a better marriage. Whenever possible, you're trying to marry up."

Two hundred years of more or less unbroken warfare had created thousands of widows and orphans in the English countryside and devastated much of the farmland they needed to survive. The conscription and slaughter of the Crusades, which began in 1097, hit rural areas far harder than the towns too, because the noblemen leading this charge to the Holy Land used farm workers from their own estates to drag along as cannon fodder. Many of the women left behind in England's villages had no option but to trudge into the nearest large town, hoping to eke out a living there however they could - and for many that meant just one thing. "Women of doubtful virtue abounded," Walter de Hemingburgh wrote after visiting a medieval fair. "The price was a packet of lace needles."

There would never again be enough legitimate work for the hordes of poor women flooding into urban areas. Southwark's brothels were where many women in this position finished up and the Church's new dominance there meant it would rule every aspect of their lives. <sup>(17)</sup>

## Chapter 4: Samhain at the gates

We come now to the tricky question of what name I should use for the man who officiated at the Cross Bones vigil last October. Was it John Constable running things that evening, or John Crow? Constable's own answer can be found in Dr Adrian Harris's 2010 paper *Honouring the Outcast Dead*. "A newcomer to Cross Bones, apparently a little unsure about which John had shown her around the graveyard, asked if his name was John Crow," Harris writes. "'Yes,' he said and added with a smile, 'especially here'." So: John Crow it is. <sup>(18)</sup>

Greeting a few familiar faces in the crowd, Crow picked up three or four of the candles waiting at the base of the gates and handed them out among the crowd. The women he'd chosen clutched the candles reverently to their chests, the light dancing on their faces from below. Suddenly, our gathering looked like a carol service and that proved quite an appropriate image for the ceremony that followed. Two of the evening's helpers shrugged into yellow high-visibility vests and shuffled us all a few steps forward out of the narrow road to form a close-packed congregation around Crow and the gates behind him. These were the Goose Samurai, he explained, and the yellow "no parking" lines which now separated us from Redcross Way could be viewed either as a simple marker to keep us safe from traffic or, more mystically, as the boundary of our ritual's "liminal zone". The Goose Samurai themselves preferred a more playful term: "Please keep within the Lines of Death," they reminded us every time a car passed.

On the dot of 7:00pm, Crow rang a tiny bell to mark the beginning of the ceremony. He told us a little about the history of the site and the ideas behind tonight's event, explaining that each month's vigil had a slightly different theme. I smiled when he mentioned in passing that every July's vigil was dedicated to Isis, thinking what a pleasing echo this made for the ancient Roman worship nearby. Often, the vigil's theme is a seasonal one, drawn from the pagan calendar, and tonight we were to celebrate Samhain ("sou-wain"), an old Gaelic festival marking the end of the harvest season and the beginning of winter.

Jennifer, another of the helpers, handed round a bundle of black cardboard leaves, about six inches long, cut carefully into shape and with a handwritten message added in silver marker pen. On one side, mine read, "The Goose and the Crow bring you the Samhain gift of...". Flipping it over to complete the message, I found "...open pathways". These, Jennifer explained, could be kept as our own souvenirs of the evening, added to the gates as an offering to Cross Bones' dead, or passed to someone else in the crowd as a gesture of goodwill. I kept mine. <sup>(19)</sup>

As we settled into the ceremony, an atmosphere of quiet respect spread through the crowd and one which even the sillier "new age" aspects of the proceedings could not dispel. As Crow began telling us about the type of people condemned to a Cross Bones burial, for example, it suddenly felt very wrong that I should still be wearing my cap, so I found myself removing it and spent the rest of the evening bare-headed.

Crow dotted two or three songs throughout the ceremony, performing them with an acoustic guitar and encouraging us all to sing along. That's a big ask for a thoroughly-repressed white Englishman of my generation, but even when it came to *Hoof & Horn's* hippyish insistence that we are all "one with the Goddess", I did my best to join in. I was quite emphatically not there to mock what was going on and once I persuaded myself to surrender a little, I had to admit the evening was surprisingly moving. Twenty minutes in,

I found myself so swept along by the ceremony that I was reaching forward to touch the gates and chanting along with the best of them.

At the heart of every Cross Bones vigil are the long white ribbons distributed to everyone attending, each with a name, a date of death and an address or occupation inked on to it by hand. These are drawn from a list of about 150 names which Constable compiled from the St Saviour's Parish burial register, selecting those individuals whose circumstances marked them as likely candidates for a pauper's grave. The parish records don't distinguish between the various different graveyards in St Saviour's, so this is the best hope we have of putting a name to any of Cross Bones' dead. "The truth is, the vast majority of people, we don't even know their names," Constable told some visitors at the gates in 2006. "These names are really symbolic of all the people who are buried here."<sup>(20)</sup>

"It's a tricky thing, because people like absolute certainty," he added when I questioned him about the ribbons last year. "I went to the Metropolitan Archive and found two microfiches full of names from the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. My guide was really just professions and addresses. Somebody from the workhouse, somebody found dead in the street, all that kind of stuff. Someone with an address like Redcross Way, or Union Street or one of those neighbouring streets. And jobs – the sort of good, honest, working-class job that might still indicate you're likely to end up at Cross Bones. I think the most we ever tied on the gates was 123 names at one of the Halloween vigils."

The ribbon Jennifer handed me at last October's vigil was labeled, "3<sup>rd</sup> November, 1838. Eliza Hennacey, Gravel Lane, aged 4 months". When everyone in the crowd had taken one, Crow asked us each to read our own ribbon's details aloud, overlapping or taking turns as we pleased and then to step forward and tie it on the gates. He asked the veterans there to take a lead and about half the rest of the crowd followed suit, the names and dates spilling out to fill the night air around us.<sup>(21, 22)</sup>

When a moment's silence opened up, I read out Eliza's name in a strong clear voice, trying to give my tone a touch of extra poignancy when I reached her age, then tied her ribbon firmly to a bare spot on one of the gate's upright bars. All around me, others were doing the same thing. Crow turned to face the gates and recited some Japanese verses beneath our jumbled chorus of names, dates and ages. A slight sense of absurdity seemed to strike him at this point and he said something about the vigils including some elements which seem thrown in almost at random, but that's just the way things have evolved over the years.<sup>(23)</sup>

After another song – I believe it was *John Crow's Riddle* – we turned to future plans for Cross Bones and the City of London's new interest in Southwark. With the £450m Shard development now completed so close to Cross Bones, Crow explained, pressure to build here could only increase. Our own concerns about the site came in a long historical tradition, he added, calling forward another Cross Bones helper to illustrate this. She read aloud from an 1883 letter to *The Times* protesting at plans to use Cross Bones as a building site even then. In the letter, Lord Brabazon, chairman of the Metropolitan Public Gardens Association, called on the authorities, "to save this ground from such desecration and to retain it as an open space for the use and enjoyment of the people".<sup>(24)</sup>

In an ideal world, that's what the Friends of Cross Bones would like too, with the site turned into a public park and turned over to the local residents. In our later interview, though, Constable acknowledged that some development there is probably inevitable and the most realistic strategy is to insist that this incorporates a small memorial garden to acknowledge Cross Bones' significance. "Clearly, the land is worth millions," he told me. "To tell Transport for London, 'You can't develop any of it' would be insane. But at the

same time, it cannot be simply about the financial value of the land – it needs to take account of what that land means to people.”<sup>(25)</sup>

Back at the gates, Crow took us through a little more of the site’s history, then asked if anyone there would like to step forward and perform a song or poem of their own. The first to oblige was Zana, a woman in woolly hat and glasses who looked rather like a put-upon librarian. She read her own poem about coming to the Cross Bones site every time she felt lost for some reason and the way it helped her celebrate a wild side to her personality which found no outlet elsewhere. Next up was a painfully shy young man called Sergai with long black hair and a black beard, who borrowed Crow’s guitar to sing a few verses which he said had occurred to him that very moment. He sang and played very quietly for a minute or two, then dissolved in a cloud of self-consciousness, handed back the guitar and melted into the crowd again. “That just came from the moment, didn’t it?” Crow said as we clapped. “That’s lovely.”

Crow gave us one more of his own songs then, after about an hour of ceremony, it was time to wrap things up. We shuffled even closer in, those at front almost burying their faces in the be-ribboned gates, and Crow led us in a couple of final chants, one dedicated to the Goose herself and one to the gates’ role as an improvised shrine. As we repeated each line, Jennifer circled behind us, drizzling gin on the ground to bind us all inside the ritual’s sacred space. The gin’s juniper scent infused the air like incense and we chanted the hour-long ritual’s final words:

*“Here lay your hearts, your flowers,  
Your book of hours,  
Your fingers, your thumbs,  
Your ‘Miss you Mum’s,  
Here hang your hopes, your dreams,  
Your ‘Might have beens’,  
Your locks, your keys,  
Your mysteries.”*<sup>(10, 26)</sup>

As our scrum round the gates broke off into knots of two or three, Jennifer passed the goose-shaped wicker basket round for donations to help defray the cost of the evening. The taller guys present were drafted to untie the Guadalupe bunting so it could be safely stored for another day, one or two of us took the opportunity to buy a copy of Constable’s *Southwark Mysteries* paperback and, amid many hugs, people started to drift away. As I turned back up Redcross Way towards the Tube, I heard a final voice from the gates behind me. “Someone finish off the gin,” it said.<sup>(27)</sup>

## Chapter 5: Birth of the Liberty

England started the 12<sup>th</sup> Century with a new King, when Henry I seized the throne from his older brother William Rufus in 1100. Both men were sons of William the Conqueror, whose 1086 Domesday Book survey of the kingdom mentions St Saviour's dock as a working harbour and credits the area with at least 40 households and a large church on the site of what's now Southwark Cathedral. The Icelandic saga *Heimskringla* refers to a place across the river from London called Suthvirki, which it says was "a very considerable trading place" in the 11<sup>th</sup> century.

Most of Southwark – or Suthvirki - was then owned by Bishop Odo of Bayeux, William the Conqueror's brother. Shortly before Henry took the throne, Odo passed his Southwark estates to the Abbot at Bermondsey Priory. That change came in 1090 and was signed into law by Henry 14 years later when he granted the priory jurisdiction over "the hide of Southwark". This meant neither the City of London nor the county of Surrey had any authority over Southwark and created what was later known as a "Liberty" – an area ruled only by its hlaford, an Old English word which translates roughly as "lord of the manor".

"All justice came from the King," the Southwark historian Patricia Dark told me. "The person who was ultimately responsible for courts and taxes and fines and fees – and who ultimately got them – was the King. But the King can do whatever he wants and one way to either reward a faithful follower, or to make somebody into a faithful follower was to give them the rights of justice for a certain geographical area. It could be a county, it could be the area immediately round your manor, it could be a whole bunch of different manors." In creating a Liberty, the King would retain the right to try major civil cases and very serious criminal offences such as murder in his own courts, but delegate everything else. "Quite a lot of the fines and fees would go into the coffers of whoever held the rights," Dark explained. "So if you were the King, you had a vested interest in saying, 'If it's a really, really big civil case, then I want that money to go into my purse, not yours.'"

Another exception to the Liberty's power would be the right to try clergymen. Even the King didn't have this power, which the Church insisted on retaining for itself, so he was in no position to delegate it to the Liberty either. "Technically, if you were a priest, you could not be tried under the King's justice," Dark told me. "You were not a subject of the King so much as you were a subject of the Church." It followed that members of the clergy who committed a crime must be tried in the Church's own ecclesiastical courts. This underlines the point that even an Abbot or a Bishop relied on secular authority in running his Liberty, not on religious power. In this respect, they were just one more earthly lord of the manor like any other. <sup>(28)</sup>

For the Abbot, Odo's gift brought the opportunity to collect rent from Southwark's residents and fines from those who broke his rules. But it also carried the troublesome duty of policing this turbulent part of London. The King's courts would step in where an exceptionally serious charge such as murder was involved, but otherwise whatever happened in Southwark was the Abbot's problem - and perhaps that's why he decided not to hang on to the area for long. In 1107, he leased the Liberty's 70 acres of Bankside real estate between Southwark Bridge and what's now Tate Modern to the Bishop of Winchester, William Gifford, at an annual rent of £8.

This area included all of Southwark's biggest brothels plus its most violent, crime-ridden pubs – and the Abbot made it clear that taking over responsibility for

keeping order there was part of the deal. Unlike the priory at that time, which had started rebuilding only in 1082, Gifford's Bishopric had the staff and organisation needed to set up a proper administration at Southwark with all the courts, bureaucrats and enforcers that required. "It was the responsibility of the hlaford to administer correction to the 'light-tayled huswives of the bank' for the sins of fornication and whoredom, as well as overseeing the 'light' houses themselves," Burford writes. "And Bishop Gifford had now become the hlaford."<sup>(29)</sup>

It's important to understand that bishops in medieval England were not just churchmen, but politicians and statesmen too. Winchester was one of the oldest, richest and most important dioceses in the country at this time, which ensured its Bishop a great deal of influence. "In the very early part of the medieval period, Winchester was actually the most important city in England for the simple reason that's where the Royal Treasury was," Dark told me. "When William Rufus died in the New Forest, the first thing Henry I – as he became – did was to ride hell for leather to Winchester and claim the Treasury, which contained the crown."<sup>(30)</sup>

Winchester is only 60 miles from London, but even that might be two days' journey in the 12<sup>th</sup> Century. By taking on the Southwark estates, Gifford was planting his Bishopric's flag in the nation's capital and ensuring it a useful source of income there too. Not only that, but the Liberty's Thames-side frontage gave anyone living there an easy commute by river from the steps at Stoney Street to the King's Westminster court. Gifford was succeeded as Bishop of Winchester in 1129 by Henry de Blois, who immediately decreed that heavy new penalties must be imposed on any girl found working in the Bankside brothels while infected with "the filthy disease". He certainly had some kind of venereal disease in mind, but we don't know which one.<sup>(31)</sup>

At some point in the 1140s, de Blois tightened his grip on Southwark by purchasing the leased land outright and beginning work on a new bishop's palace there which he called Winchester House. Because he bought the Liberty's land in his official capacity, it would pass down to be managed by each new Bishop of Winchester in turn. Just like a modern corporation, the Bishopric itself was effectively immortal and that ensured the arrangement could remain stable for centuries to come. De Blois had helped his brother Stephen take the English throne in 1135 and remained a major player even after Henry II became monarch in 1154. "Winchester House would have been his pile in London and it allowed him to keep a finger on the political pulse," Dark told me. "He was somebody powerful enough that even Henry II couldn't oppose him."

As the Liberty's ruling authority, de Blois was entitled to collect rents and licence fees from all the individual brothel owners along the Bankside, as well as fines from anyone found guilty in the courts he maintained to police these establishments. His new palace was sited neatly between the church that became Southwark Cathedral and the notorious Clink prison where offenders were consigned. Tucked cosily between these symbols of his Godly authority on one side and his secular responsibilities on the other, de Blois surveyed his domain.<sup>(32)</sup>

The official name for this area was The Liberty of Winchester, but its sarcastic residents dubbed it The Liberty of the Clink instead. The whores who filled its streets were quickly nicknamed "Winchester Geese" to reflect the Bishop's role as their new lord and master. The Bankside brothels themselves came to be called "stews" either after the carp ponds on the Bishop's estate (which were known as "stew ponds" for their role in supplying food) or as a corruption of "estuwes", the Norman French word for "stove". It's thought that the stoves lent this name first to the bath-house sweating tubs they heated, then to the bath-houses themselves and finally to the brothels which bath-houses were always assumed to contain. It followed that the brothel-keeper was known as a



“stewholder”, even when – as was the case in Southwark – his establishment offered no bathing facilities at all. <sup>(33)</sup>

In 1161, Henry II decided he needed to beef up the rules imposed by custom on Bankside for over a century and signed into law his *Ordinances Touching the Government of the Stewholders in Southwark Under the Direction of the Bishop of Winchester*. Soldiers returning from the Crusades were bringing all kinds of new STDs and other infections back with them to England and Henry knew from his own whorehouses in France just how much disease and disorder such establishments could spread if not properly policed. It was time to crack the whip.

Southwark’s customary rules, the proclamation explains, “of late were broken to the great displeasure of God and great hurt unto the lord and utter undoing to all his poor tenants there dwelling and also to the great multiplication of horrible sin with the single women, who ought to have their own going and coming at their own liberty, as it appears by the old customs”. Henry’s new ordinance set out 39 rules for running the brothels on Bankside, formalising the understanding of established custom and practice there into cold print. The regime these rules imposed – its rights as well as its penalties – gave Southwark’s brothels what amounted to royal recognition, giving them a special status and protection they would enjoy for the next four centuries.

You’ll find a full list of the rules in my appendix below, so I’m just going to canter through them here. I’ve put them into modern English and occasionally collapsed two linked rules into one. They fall into seven broad categories:

#### **Protecting the Girls.**

- \* No stewholder to prevent his whores entering or leaving the premises at will. Each whore to pay 14 pence per week for her chamber in the brothel where she works (and, most likely, lives full-time).
- \* Constables to search every brothel once a quarter to check no woman is imprisoned there. Any such woman found to be escorted safely out of the Liberty (and so beyond her stewholder’s reach).
- \* No stewholder to lend one his whores a total of more than six shillings and eightpence. Larger sums to be considered void by the Bishop’s court. This measure was designed to prevent girls being effectively enslaved by running up large debts.
- \* No whore to be prevented from boarding wherever she wishes.

#### **Protecting the Church.**

- \* No stewholder to open for business on a religious holiday, except between the hours of noon and 2:00pm. Evidently there was a lunchtime trade to be catered for.
- \* All whores to be expelled from the Liberty on holy days from 8:00am till 11:00am and from 1:00pm till 5:00pm.
- \* No stewholder to knowingly accept a nun or another man’s wife for whoring without the Bishop’s permission. Burford thinks growing poverty among nuns may have been tempting them to swap the convent for the brothel at this time.

#### **Protecting the Customers.**

- \* No stewholder to imprison any customer on the premises for not paying his bill. Disputes must be taken to the Bishop’s court instead.
- \* All stewholders to return any customer’s harness (bandolier, sword,

buckler etc) left with them for safekeeping.

### **Protecting Other Businesses.**

\* No stewardholder to employ support staff beyond his wife, plus one washerwoman and one male ostler. Seems designed to prevent brothels expanding into a full tavern – or perhaps simply to prevent any single brothel growing too large.

\* No whore to engage in spinning or carding during her breaks. These trades were governed by powerful guilds, which didn't want the competition.

\* No stewardholder to sell food or drink from the same premises where his whores work. Again, this seems designed to protect the surrounding taverns.

### **Protecting Society.**

\* All whores to identify themselves by wearing some agreed garment indicating their trade. No whore to wear an apron, as this was then the mark of a respectable woman. There are shades of the Roman stola here. <sup>(3)</sup>

\* No whore to entice any passing man into the brothel by pulling at his coat or any other item of clothing. No stewardholder's wife to entice any man into the house against his will.

\* No whore to throw stones at passers-by or make faces at them if they refuse to come in. No whore to "chide with any man or make a fray".

\* No whore to be found in the Liberty between sunset and dawn on any day when the King's Parliament or Council is sitting at Westminster. This was to ensure legislators didn't skive off to the brothels when they should have been working. <sup>(34)</sup>

\* No stewardholder to employ an ostler on a contract of more than six months. Big, tough men were always in demand as bouncers in Southwark's brothels, but the King wanted to ensure they were available to the army instead.

\* All stewardholders to allow each whore's final customer of the day to stay overnight. No stewardholder to operate a boat "against the custom of the manor". Both these measures were designed to minimise night-time river traffic, when brothel customers returning to the north bank might otherwise have helped to conceal thieves or political plotters making the same journey.

\* No stewardholder to allow any whore to work on his premises if he knows she is either pregnant or has "the burning sickness" (probably gonorrhoea).

\* No man to cause an assault in the Liberty by breaching these rules. No brothel-keeper to allow cursing or blasphemy on his premises, as this often led to trouble.

\* No stewardholder to allow coin-clipping on his premises. This was the practice of shaving a little precious metal from a coin's circumference and it amounted to theft.

### **Fighting Corruption.**

\* Any constable failing to report a breach of these rules to the court to be imprisoned till he's paid whatever fine the Bishop imposes.

\* No constable or bailiff to accept bail personally for a prisoner's release.

Instead, the bail must be collected by the Bishop's court.

- \* No bailiff to allow an offender bail without the court's authorisation.
- \* No bailiff or constable to be paid more than fourpence for an arrest unless it is exceptionally serious case involving a large sum.

### **General Administration/ Miscellaneous.**

- \* All stewholders to eject their whores from the premises between the date these rules were written and the next Whitsuntide. This would give the Liberty's authorities time to get organised for the new regime and start from Whitsuntide with a clean slate.
- \* No-one to bring any claim involving more than 40 shillings (£2) to the Bishop's court. The King would want to reserve bigger, more lucrative cases for himself.
- \* All stewholders to register new whores arriving on their premises with the Bishop's officials.
- \* Constables to search every brothel once a week for miscellaneous infringements.
- \* No whore to take a lover of her own "against the use and custom of the manor". Burford says: "The reason must have been economic. Time spent on free fornication meant less revenue for the whoremaster, the bailiff and the Bishop."
- \* Any whore operating independently in the Liberty must obey the same rules set out here for stewholders.
- \* Measures were also taken to curb foreign stewholders and whores operating in London, but the details of these are unclear.

Many of these rules seem surprisingly enlightened – particularly those designed to protect the girls themselves from sexual slavery. By paying the Bishop's court its licence fee, the steward and his girls were placing their business on a legal footing. Keeping that legal status meant obeying the Bishop's rules – or at least not flouting them too openly – but it also gave the girls a chance to take complaints against the stewholders or their johns to a court that recognised the whores themselves had some rights. "In my work, the Goose regards the Bishop as her protector," Constable reminded me. In *The Southwark Mysteries*, he puts it like this:

*"I was born a Goose of Southwark,  
By the Grace of Mary Overie,  
Whose Bishop gives me licence,  
To sin within the Liberty."*

It's worth remembering, though, that writing down a rule is a lot easier than enforcing it and that the Bishop's constables and bailiffs would often have been willing to turn a blind eye if the bribe a steward offered them was big enough to outweigh the risk. In some cases – such as rule six's stricture against big loans – the girl herself may well have been complicit in breaking the very rules laid down to protect her. Where else was she supposed to go for desperately-needed money except to the steward? And if the Liberty's court disregarded her debt, then so what? The steward could always threaten to beat it out of her instead, or simply throw her out on the street to starve. The number of women driven to work as whores was always greater than the number of chambers available to them in Southwark's licensed brothels, so a replacement would not

be hard to find.

All too often, the fines levied against a brothel would ultimately have come from the girls working there anyway. All the power was on the steward's side in this relationship, giving him plenty of ways to extort extra money from his whores by whatever violent or bullying means he chose. They were left with no choice but to work harder than ever to replace their lost income and where was the incentive to report an infringement when that was the most likely result?

Some offences imposed a penalty of fines on both the whore and the steward involved, but added a second physical punishment for the girl. Where an unregistered whore was discovered on the premises, for example, the steward could be fined as much as 40 shillings (£2). But the girl herself was assumed to be complicit too and subject not only to a fine of up to 20 shillings, but also to a session in the cucking stool and expulsion from the Liberty. The cucking stool was a refinement on the ducking stool we've all seen in depictions of witch trials. But instead of dunking the offender in a village pond, the cucking stool dipped her in raw sewage, and the prescribed penalty in this case was three full immersions. Even if she survived that – which couldn't be taken for granted – the girl would be thrown out of the only part of London which offered her trade any measure of legal protection.

Breaking Rule 19's ban on taking a lover of her own could earn the girl a session in the cucking stool too – one immersion in this case – plus three weeks in prison, a fine of six shillings and eightpence and expulsion from Southwark. Naturally, there's no penalty involved for the man she chooses, even though he may well have been her pimp or the steward himself. Causing a disturbance outside the brothel could land the girl in prison too, that penalty being set at three days inside plus, once again, a fine of six and eightpence.

The 1161 rules set their biggest fine of all at 200 shillings (£10), which was used to ensure all the biggest, most lucrative cases went direct to the King's court instead of the Bishop's. To get an idea of what a vast sum £10 was at that time, remember that it would have been enough for a Southwark whore to rent her working premises for over three years (at the going rate of 14 pence per week). In the 12<sup>th</sup> Century, even the wealthiest baron in England had an annual income of under £700 and you could run the average castle for only £16 a year. <sup>(35)</sup>

The next tier down was a batch of £5 fines aimed at fighting corruption. These would be imposed on stewards who impeded a constable's search of their premises and officials who allowed bail without the court's permission. "Keeping clandestine whores was another way to fiddle extra money and no doubt the constable could always be squared," Burford writes. "That offences were concealed by venal officials is clear from the regulation which made such activities punishable by a spell in prison for the official concerned." The measure he has in mind there is Rule 24's authority for the Bishop's court to imprison any official who knowingly concealed an offence and to keep him there till whatever fine the court imposed had been fully paid. The bigger the fine, the longer the jail sentence would be and that gave the court what amounted to an open-ended power. This Draconian measure suggests that corruption was both so widespread and so lucrative that only the severest penalties stood a chance of denting it. <sup>(36)</sup>

Other £5 fines were added to the rules later, levied for allowing a whore to work on your premises when you knew she had a venereal disease, or for employing an old soldier recently returned from overseas (and hence suspected of carrying an STD himself). This tells us how great the fear of such disease was and how little the doctors of the time were able to do to combat it.

It's also instructive to look at which offences carried the lowest fines, these

presumably being the crimes which the authorities thought they should make some token effort to suppress, but which no-one much cared about one way or the other. The fine for accepting a nun or another man's wife as one of your whores, for example, was set at just one shilling (12 pence), which meant the steward had to collect only a single week's rent from the new girl to get himself back in profit. A steward who stopped one of his whores leaving the premises when she wanted to do so faced a fine of just three and fourpence, as did any whorehouse customer who caused a fray. Contrast that with the treatment dished out to the girls themselves for causing a fray: three days in prison, plus a fine of six and eightpence.

We can see from surviving records of the Bishop's courts – known in the jargon as courts leet – that some minor offences were simply impossible to enforce. One example would be the rules governing a whore's behaviour as she waited for business in the brothel's entrance, which allowed her to do nothing more than sit there quietly and look enticing. "She was not allowed to solicit custom by cries or gestures or to grab the potential customer by his gown," Burford writes. "That this rule was a non-starter is evidenced by the great number of cases that came up before the courts leet for centuries afterwards." The fine in this case was 20 shillings which, when collected so regularly, must have given the courts a very useful source of steady income.

The first stone version of London Bridge – not Tower Bridge but London Bridge – opened in 1209, leading directly from what's now Monument into Borough High Street and making it easier than ever for Londoners to reach the Bankside brothels. Southwark was unable to cater for Londoner's appetites on its own, however and a second zone of legalised prostitution was opened just outside the city walls at Farringdon in about 1240. That street, halfway between Smithfield and the Old Bailey, was quickly dubbed Cock Lane, a name it still carries on the London map today. Near Cock Lane – and also just outside the city walls – Chancery Lane and Fetter Lane had brothels of their own.<sup>(37, 38)</sup>

We have deeds from this era showing that many of the properties known to operate as whorehouses in all three of these streets were owned by the Parish of St Mary Overie – a piece of Southwark real estate which included both the Bishop of Winchester's palace and the whole Liberty of the Clink. Burford thinks the London city authorities must have deliberately engineered things this way to give the Liberty jurisdiction over the new red light districts and so ensure the 1161 rules were applied there too. The idea was evidently to confine prostitution to certain designated areas outside the city walls so that London itself could be kept free of the trade. In 1285, King Edward I issued an order that all whores must either move outside London's walls or face 40 days in jail. Brothels within the designated areas – the biggest of which was Southwark itself, of course – were happily tolerated providing that order there was more or less maintained. By 1287, even the Dean and Chapter of St Paul's Cathedral owned property in Cock Lane which they knew perfectly well was let out as a brothel.

At this point, Europe was still entirely Catholic and that allowed the 13<sup>th</sup> Century Church a certain pragmatism where human frailty was concerned. Prostitution was seen as a necessary evil, which gave society a vital safety valve and protected other women from rape. The theologian Thomas Aquinas, who lived from 1225 to 1274, compared a town's red light district to the cesspool in a palace. "Take away the cesspool and the palace will become an unclean and evil-smelling place," he wrote. That comparison wasn't exactly flattering to the girls working in Southwark's stews, but at least it acknowledged they were playing a useful role in society. "There were even religious people who advocated for prostitutes' rights as labourers," Melissa Ditmore adds in her 2005 *Encyclopedia of Prostitution and Sex Work*. "Thomas of Chobham, for example, dedicated four chapters of his early 13<sup>th</sup> century manual to prostitutes and argued, among

other things, that they deserved to be paid for their labour just like any other worker.”<sup>(39)</sup>

That atmosphere of easy tolerance and the sensibly pragmatic laws it produced was soon to face a severe test. Disease was coming to London and it would hit Southwark particularly hard.

## Chapter 6: Emily's plaque

On the morning after the Cross Bones vigil, I gathered a few offerings of my own for the gates and prepared to set off for Redcross Way again.

I'd gone along the previous evening expecting one of the site's routine monthly ceremonies, planning to return with my gifts when the full Halloween ritual came round in a week's time. Instead, I'd arrived at the gates to discover a flyer announcing that evening's proceedings would fold both October ceremonies into one. "This is our 101<sup>st</sup> consecutive vigil and will feature elements from the Halloween of Crossbones ritual drama (1998-2010), including the names of the dead," it explained. I asked Constable later why they'd decided to do this and he replied that everyone simply needed a rest. "We did 13 Halloweens and we might do another cycle of them sometime," he told me. "But it was quite good to do 13 and then have a break, because it was an awful lot of work to do them. When we stopped, we moved some of those Halloween elements to the 23<sup>rd</sup> of October."

It was that first Halloween procession in 1998 which began the tradition of decorating Cross Bones' gates with all the ribbons, costume jewellery and lace they've sported ever since. A few days after the 1998 procession, the first of the site's homemade plaques appeared too. "A plaque has mysteriously appeared commemorating the Southwark prostitutes who were buried in unconsecrated, forgotten graves," the *South London Press* reported. "Playwright John Constable, who has long campaigned for the working women of olde Southwark to be remembered, is delighted. He first spotted the carved wooden plaque on a wall in Redcross Way."<sup>(40)</sup>

Constable takes up this story in *The Southwark Mysteries*. "The plaque, adorned with varnished flowers, was widely believed to be the work of a local working girl called Emily," he writes. "It read: 'To fix in time this site, the Crossbones Graveyard where the Whores and Paupers of the Southwark Liberty, in graves unconsecrated, lay resting. Where now, at Millennial turning, the Whores and Paupers and our Friends return, incarnate, in ritual, with tributes and offerings, to honour, to remember'."

Like many of the plaques that have since appeared at Cross Bones, this one didn't last long. "As the Halloween of Crossbones evolved into an annual event, a succession of home-made plaques regularly appeared," Constable writes. "Each was eventually vandalised, or perhaps removed by the site owners, to be replaced by a new plaque – until, in 2005, Southwark's 'Cleaner, Greener, Safer' fund paid for the official brass plaque and ivy planters which now adorn the gate." That official plaque, which has remained safely fixed to the centre of the gates ever since, reads: "Cross Bones Graveyard. In medieval times, this was an unconsecrated graveyard for prostitutes or 'Winchester Geese'. By the 18<sup>th</sup> century, it had become a paupers' burial ground, which closed in 1853. Here, local people have created a memorial shrine. The Outcast Dead. RIP."

Constable's group, the Friends of Cross Bones, had put the site forward for one of Southwark Council's official blue plaques four years running by the time the brass one appeared, but always lost out to more prestigious sites in the Borough. "One year we were up against Shakespeare's Rose Theatre," he told me. "They're an international trust and they were getting votes from all over the world. Once we got the brass plaque, we thought that's actually better in some ways."

Several other home-made plaques have joined the brass one on the gate since, the

most touching of which are the laminated cardboard ones memorialising the street prostitutes murdered in Britain today. They're a sobering reminder of how little has changed for women pursuing this most dangerous of trades and of how casually such women are murdered and thrown away. Here's just a few examples, the first two of which are close enough in style and wording to suggest they were placed there by the same people:

\* *“Gemma, Anneli, Paula, Netty, Tania: In this place of healing where the Wild Feminine is honoured and celebrated for all that she is – whore and virgin, mother and lover, maiden and crone, creator and destroyer – we will remember and offer prayers for the murdered women of Ipswich and honour them as women. For all that they were and could have been.”* (Gemma Adams, Anneli Alderton, Paula Clennell, Annette Nicholls and Tania Nicol were killed by Steve Wright in 2006.)<sup>(41)</sup>

\* *“Suzanne, Susan, Shelley: In this place of healing, we shall remember and offer prayers for the murdered woman of Bradford and honour them as women. For all that they were and could have been. RIP.”* (Suzanne Blamires, Susan Rushworth and Shelley Armitage were killed by Stephen Griffiths in 2009/2010.)

\* *“In memory of all the women who died whilst working in the oldest profession, who the rest of society chose not to remember: Jane, Caroline, Rachel (2000), Tracey (2001), Sarah, Tina (2002), Fiona (2003), Hashley, Deborah, Tracey (2004), Samantha, Ellen, Sam (2005), Emma, Zoey, Michelle (2006), Caroline, Julie (2007), Sonia (2008), Miss P (2009), Kim, Ann, Joanne ... a few to name. It's not just another day! It's not just another Death! In memory of all the workers never forgotten – POW staff, Nottingham.”* (POW is Nottingham charity formed by the city's prostitutes themselves to offer health information, counselling and education.)

Everything I'd read about the Cross Bones Halloween ceremonies suggested that was where the gates' most colourful supporters gathered, so I was sorry I'd missed the chance to take part in one myself. “Political activists, evangelical Christians, locals, rough sleepers, actors, former addicts and passing tourists as well as the regular pagans and sex workers turn up,” the *Financial Times*' Kesewa Hennessy wrote after her own Halloween visit to the gates in 2008.<sup>(42)</sup>

That year's event had begun, as they always did, in the basement bar of the Hop Cellars in Southwark Street. Katherine Angel of *The Independent* was there too, waiting nervously at the back of the room as Constable swept in wearing his long black cloak and announced they were ready to begin.<sup>(43)</sup>

“A priestess started things off, leading us in a meditative moment of humming,” Angel writes. “A single note was held, surprisingly tunefully, by the crowd. I felt a space open up in the room. My ears, my whiskers, perked up; I was suddenly alert and curious. A witch broke into a rap. Someone then asked us to close our eyes and think of the dead. To think of past pain, past loss, past regret – and let these go. We each read out a word: light, compassion, generosity – things to wish for and cherish.

“Constable then took over, adopting his persona of John Crow, his ‘trickster-shaman’. Actress Michelle Watson became the Goose, a prostitute on the Bankside, a



wise and sassy creature radiating erotic scorn. Together, Crow and the Goose performed, in verse and song, sections of Constable's poetry, bringing to life the women refused burial on consecrated ground by the very Church that licensed their practice.

"The Crossbones campaign celebrates a strong, elemental and witchy female sexuality. This is the language Crossbones speaks most eloquently through the 'Whores d'Ouvres' of the Halloween event: two women in basques who schooled us in the spiritual potentials of our pelvic floors. We held hands with our neighbours, breathed and moved our hips in unison – a lesson in spiritual burlesque."<sup>(44)</sup>

Dr Adrian Harris of Winchester University adds a few more details in his own account of a Halloween ritual at the Hop Cellars. "The performances consisted of songs and poems from *The Southwark Mysteries* and a demonstration of Tantric breathing from Jahnet de Light and her Whores d'Ouvres," he writes. "Many people, especially the women, were in fancy dress. But instead of the usual 'trick or treat' ghouls, they sported the Elizabethan costume of the commoners – just the kind of garb that would have been worn by the 'Winchester Geese'. The large basement room was decorated with flowers and two altars; one for our own beloved dead was designated as an 'Altar to the Ancestors'. The other was dedicated to the prostitutes of Crossbones. This latter altar was laden with suitable offerings: chocolate, cigars and a bottle of gin."<sup>(18)</sup>

Constable confirmed these accounts when I asked him what I'd missed by not being able to attend a full Halloween ritual. "With the Halloween ones, we went as close as I would go to doing a proper magic ritual," he told me. "I've always said we do a kind of magic at the gates, but it's the sort of magic you can do in the open. That's the thing about the vigils: we only do stuff there that anyone, whether they're a pagan, a Christian or a happy atheist can participate in without feeling weird about it. So the vigils are very much shaped by that.

"The Halloween ceremony obviously pushed that envelope a bit. When we did it at Halloween, we'd have a Samhain ritual to greet the New Year and people would bring photos of their own dead. Then we'd have performances from selected poems in *The Southwark Mysteries* and the third element would be the Goose's tantric teachings. We'd always have a tantric sex worker, who would lead a simple workshop. Everybody kept their clothes on, but it was interesting. People would be holding hands and inwardly squeezing their pelvic muscles and all of that. We'd end with a procession to the gates, where we'd read the names and tie the ribbons."

Introducing too many of the Halloween ritual's freakier elements into the mainstream monthly vigils, he added, would risk putting off anyone who found the gates' memorial role interesting but ran a mile from anything that smelt of new age twaddle. People like me, in other words – and perhaps like many of those crowded round the gates with me on that October evening too. "I like the fact that we get all sorts there," Constable told me. "There's a couple of ladies well into their eighties who come a couple of times a year – churchgoers, not the sort of people you would expect there at all. And that's what I love. We are genuinely an eclectic group of people, of all kinds. The thing with the vigils is, you can just turn up and fully participate without needing some sort of initiation into it."

You'd think rapping witches and a spot of pelvic squeezing would be enough for anyone attending the Halloween ceremony, but some insist matters don't stop there. In *The Londonist's* October 2012 podcast, Quentin Woolf interviewed Constable and a Dulwich activist called Ingrid Beazley together on location at the Cross Bones gates. "We were sitting on the floor and we were handed a little round mirror," Beazley told him of one Hop Cellars ceremony she'd attended. "And on the mirror was engraved 'You are Beautiful'. It was for the women and we were supposed to look at our fannies with it."

Woolf moved on before Constable had a chance to comment on this in the recording itself, but the memory still rankled when I interviewed him a year later. “I remember it well - it was a male sex worker who handed out the mirrors,” he told me. “But she remembered him saying, ‘It’s for women to look at their fannies with’ and I don’t remember that at all. I remember him saying, ‘You look at yourself in it’ – your face. Which makes a lot more sense.”

All this information was buzzing through my head as I sorted through my own offerings on the kitchen table. The Altar of the Ancestors which Harris describes sounded a lot like the Day of the Dead shrines I’d seen in Mexico and Texas, so that’s where I started my trawl. I’ve been collecting Day of the Dead figures for years – tiny clay statues with skulls and boney hands, each dressed to embody a certain job or personality type: the priest, the tycoon, the drunkard, the gambler and so on.

From these, I chose a street urchin hawking newspapers and a smartly-dressed businessman with a briefcase. The first figure, I thought, could represent both my own trade and the humble folk of Southwark’s past, while the second stood in for the local whores’ wealthy johns and the financial whizz-kids whose shiny office blocks now threatened to crush Cross Bones’ underfoot. Somewhere in Texas, I’d bought a cheap necklace of 16 clay beads on a nylon string, each shaped and painted like a skull, which had been languishing in a drawer ever since. Now, at last, I knew where it belonged.

To these items, I added a small plastic doll of Lois Lane I’d somehow acquired. Clad in green micro-skirt, black knee-length leather boots and with a large “city-gal” handbag slung jauntily over her shoulder, she had just the feisty sex appeal needed to do the Goose justice. A few days earlier, I’d bought two plastic miniatures of Gordon’s Gin to use as Cross Bones offerings, so they went in the bag too.

The final item returned me to my Day of the Dead souvenirs, where I found a cheap picture frame made from beaten tin, which Mexican mourners would typically use to hold the picture of a departed loved one on their family shrine. Like the necklace, this frame had been something I’d failed to find a home for ever since bringing it back to England, but now its true purpose was clear. It was as if the necklace and the frame had been waiting all this time – ten years or more – until it finally dawned on me that they belonged on the Cross Bones gates.

I knew just which picture to put in the frame too. Nasra Ismail was the Somali-born prostitute murdered near King’s Cross in March 2004, whose story I’ve told elsewhere on PlanetSlade. Her dismembered body was found in a canal close to my home and it had struck me at the time that someone should at least try to remember her name. My first attempt at that had been to write some murder ballad lyrics about her death, but giving her a spot on the gates seemed even more appropriate. I fixed a photocopy of her picture into the tin frame, added her name and date of death, then threaded some wire through the frame’s corners to tie it on with.

Down at Redcross Way, I fixed Nasra’s portrait to the gate’s vertical bars, knotted the necklace into place a few feet to the right and wedged Lois into the knot of a convenient ribbon. The two Day of the Dead figures went just inside the gate, where the bars allowed me to reach through and place them among the burnt-out candles and debris littering the makeshift altar there. I photographed everything, then waited for a quiet moment by the graveyard’s southwest corner before lobbing the two plastic miniatures of gin over the eight-foot wall into what I knew was the centre of the graves themselves. Someone will find them there one day – a tramp, a site worker, a Cross Bones volunteer – and when they do, they’re very welcome to have a drink on me.

## Chapter 7: The Black Death

**John** of Gaddesden, an English doctor writing in the early 14<sup>th</sup> century, had some advice for women on how to protect themselves against venereal disease. Immediately after sex with any suspect man, he said, the woman should jump up and down, run backwards down the stairs and inhale some pepper to make herself sneeze. Next, she should tickle her vagina with a feather dipped in vinegar to flush infected sperm out of her body, then wash her genitals thoroughly in a concoction of roses and herbs boiled in vinegar.<sup>(45)</sup>

It's hard to imagine anyone actually following this advice – let alone one of the girls in Southwark's stews. It would have puzzled the customer she'd just serviced for one thing, and running backwards downstairs sounds an excellent way to break your neck. Other doctors writing at about the same time as Gaddesden had equally eccentric remedies of their own, but at least everyone now recognised that diseases such as gonorrhoea were spread by sexual intercourse and that in itself was a big step forward.<sup>(46)</sup>

In 1321, King Edward II founded the Lock Hospital in Southwark as a treatment centre for "lepers", the name then used for anyone with an eruption of sores. It was located at what's now the junction of Tabard Street and Great Dover Street, less than a mile from the stews of Bankside and this proximity meant it soon started to specialise in VD cases. "Lock Hospital" can still be found in slang dictionaries today as a generic term for any VD clinic.

The filthy state of Southwark in those days ensured other disease was quick to spread there too. The Borough's streets were still unpaved and there were no sewers. Residents who were out and about relieved their bladder (and bowels) in any quiet alleyway, while stay-at-homes emptied their brimming chamber pots at the nearest window. Once again, the informal street names coined by the locals give us a clue to what their lives were like. The area's sex trade gave it place names like Codpiece Lane, Cuckold Court and Sluts' Hole, while the sheer amount of filth in its streets christened Dirty Lane, Foul Lane and Pissing Lane.<sup>(47, 48)</sup>

All this made Southwark an ideal breeding ground for the bubonic plague which hit London in 1348. "Historians estimate that the Black Death killed half the population of 14<sup>th</sup> century England," Stephen Smith says in his 2004 book *Underground London*. "If anything, the devastation in London was even worse. The transmission of the disease was encouraged by the narrow, busy and filthy streets, crowded houses and noisome sanitary conditions. The toll among Londoners has been variously put at between 50,000 and 100,000."<sup>(4)</sup>

A year into the plague, Edward III urged London's borough authorities to combat the infection by cleaning up their streets, but was told all the street cleaners were already dead. The more people died, the fewer were left to dispose of their remains and the faster the plague spread. "London burial grounds were soon full to overflowing and new ones were hastily dug," Smith says. "The biggest was in Southwark, where some 200 corpses were interred every day." One of these new grounds, opened just across the river from Southwark in East Smithfield, managed to stuff 2,400 bodies into its small plot by placing them five deep in long trenches rather than using individual graves. Measures like this were the only way to get each new wave of corpses buried before the next consignment arrived.

Older bodies were dug up again with indecent despatch to make more space in the ground. All over London, disinterred bones were thrown into the graveyard's charnel house. This was either a vault beneath the church itself or a small building on the grounds, where "clean" bones – those from which all the flesh had rotted away – could be consigned. In calmer times, these bones would be treated with great reverence, perhaps even prayed over by the priest, but when the pressure on graveyards hit these heights, speed was all that mattered. <sup>(49)</sup>

"Burial arrangements could break down during epidemics," writes Reading University's Professor Ralph Houlbrooke. "The Black Death compelled urban communities in particular to find new burial space quickly." There's no evidence that Cross Bones itself was used for burials this early, but it may well have been a later outbreak of plague in London which forced St Saviour's parish to requisition the site. <sup>(50)</sup>

In 1349, Edward III suspended Parliament to let MPs escape London for the relative safety of the British countryside. Anyone else rich enough to flee the capital got out too. Southwark's brothels seem to have remained open throughout the plague years, however, despite official warnings that casual copulation with multiple partners increased the risk of infection. Henry Knighton, a 14<sup>th</sup> century historian who lived through the Black Death, says the stews were actually busier than ever during the plague years. Many Londoners adopted an attitude of fatalistic abandon, thinking it was all but certain they'd catch the plague anyway, so why not do so in the arms of their favourite Bankside whore? At least that guaranteed you a little pleasure before you died.

In the spring of 1350, the death toll in London started to abate at last and Edward turned his attention to the anarchy that now prevailed in Southwark. Many of the Bishop's officials had fled during the plague years, leaving the Bankside brothels and their surrounding taverns more lawless than ever. Anyone committing a crime inside the city walls knew they had only to get across London Bridge to claim sanctuary and the welcome they now found there was warmer than ever. "Those who have committed manslaughter, robberies and diverse other felonies are privily departing into the town of Southwark, where they cannot be attached by the ministers of the City and there are openly received," said the King in an address to London's people. "And so, for default of due punishment [they] are emboldened to commit more such felonies."

If those felonies had been limited to Southwark alone, Edward might have found them easier to bear. By now, though, Southwark's thugs had grown so bold that gangs of 200 or more youths would periodically burst over the bridge into London, rob the passers-by there, loot the shops and then dash back across the river to safety. Only London had the men and resources needed to restore law and order in Southwark, but no-one who lived there was willing to call them in if it meant surrendering their borough's treasured independence. The result was an uneasy stand-off.

As far as London itself was concerned, the authorities concentrated on preventing prostitution within the city walls and on ensuring that the girls working designated areas like Cock Lane wore the proper clothing. This takes us back to the 1161 rules' requirement that whores must clearly identify themselves by wearing some agreed garment. In 1351, the City of London passed an ordinance saying "lewd or common women" must wear a striped hood to identify themselves as such and refrain from beautifying their clothes with any fur trim or fancy lining.

Any woman not of noble birth could be described as "common" in that sense and this sloppy wording made the ordinance such a wide one that it seemed to cover almost every female in the city. London's proud womenfolk weren't going to have men dictating what they could wear, so most simply ignored the ordinance and challenged any constable to arrest them if he dared. When Edward III put his own authority behind this

law three years later, he was careful to specify it applied only to London's "common whores". The striped hoods and lack of decorative trim, his proclamation declared, would "set a deformed mark on foulness to make it appear more odious".

Some working girls continued to live inside the city walls but commuted to Cock Lane or the Liberty to earn their daily crust – perhaps finding somewhere to change on the way. But wasn't long before they were banned from even lodging in the city and subject to very heavy penalties for doing so. A 1383 ordinance required whores caught in London to have their heads shaved and then be carted through the streets in a special wagon while minstrels played all around them to attract a crowd. The girl herself would have to wear that trademark hood as the cart carried her through town to the nearest prison, where she'd be placed in a pillory and publicly whipped.

"The ineffectuality of all this punishment is evident in the ordinances themselves, which provide for repeated offences and increased penalties," Burford says. Offenders caught a second time, for example, would serve ten days in jail on top of all the other penalties, while a third offence got you ten days' prison and permanent expulsion from London. A girl in this final category would be taken to one of the city gates, where she'd be roughly thrown outside. If the authorities had been able to trace her origins to Bankside – as was often the case – she'd be escorted back there and warned to stay put.

In 1393, these rules were tightened once again, saying no prostitute must "go about or lodge" in London or its suburbs, but "keep themselves in the places thereto assigned, that is to say, the stews on the other side of the Thames and in Cock Lane". Offenders could face all the penalties detailed above and have their identifying hood confiscated too. Replacing this garment would presumably have been an expensive business, but the girl would be unable to resume her trade till she'd done so.

We know there were at least two murders in the stews at around this time, because both are mentioned in the Bishop of Winchester's court rolls for 1378. One was carried out by William Chepington of Northamptonshire, who killed a Scarborough man called John Drenge at The Cardinal's Hat, one of the biggest brothels on Bankside. In the same year, a Flemish man was hanged for another murder in the stews.<sup>(51)</sup>

Dutch people – then known as Flemings – had first come to Southwark as mercenaries in William the Conqueror's army, but their relationship with the surrounding English population was sometimes thorny. Many Flemings were talented entrepreneurs and the stews they ran on Bankside operated with an efficiency and cleanliness that put their homegrown competitors to shame. We can judge their popularity by the fact that so many English whores chose to work under the Dutch name Petronella to indicate they were both fashionable and expert in their craft.

The Dutch whorehouses may have been popular with punters, but their success did not go down well with English competitors. When Wat Tyler's tax rebels arrived in Southwark in June 1381, one of their first targets was The Rose, a Dutch-operated whorehouse owned by William Walworth, the Lord Mayor of London. Until then, Tyler's men had attacked only formal symbols of the King's authority, such as prisons and the Inns of Court, so you have to wonder if it was Southwark's resentful English brothel-keepers who suggested they burn The Rose. "It's likely that the rebels destroyed the brothel not from outraged morality, but from hostility to the foreigners, specifically the Flemish," says Derek Brewer in his 1978 book *Chaucer and his World*. Having sacked these premises, which stood near London Bridge, the rioters then went on a day-long rampage, killing as many as 160 Flemish people as they moved west through the Liberty. No doubt, a good number of Southwark folk joined in the mayhem just for a chance to kill their Flemish competitors or to eliminate a rival business.<sup>(52)</sup>

"[They] beheaded without judgement or trial all the Flemings they found," one

contemporary report tells us. “Mounds of corpses were to be seen in the streets and various spots were littered with the headless bodies of the slain. In this way, they passed the entire day, bent only on the massacre of the Flemings.”<sup>(53)</sup>

A few months later, all the whorehouses destroyed were back in business again and the poll tax Tyler had objected to was sending out its demands for the year. That year’s returns from Southwark show seven men listed as stewholders in the Borough, all with addresses in the Bishop’s Liberty. “They evidently represent the proprietors of the Bankside stewhouses,” says Martha Carlin in her 1996 book *Medieval Southwark*. “All were married men, with both male and female servants; none had children aged 15 or older living at home.”<sup>(54)</sup>

The seven stewholding couples listed, together with the tax assessed as due from each pair, are:

<b><u>Stewholders</u></b>	<b><u>Joint assessment</u></b>
Walter Shirborn & wife Christian	Six shillings & eightpence
Robert Power & wife Agnes	Five shillings
Yevan Wallchman & wife Isabella	Five shillings
John David & wife Isabella	Four shillings & eightpence
Robert [illegible] and wife Isabella	Four shillings & sixpence
Richard Bailif & wife Margery	Four shillings & sixpence
William Brounes & wife Joan	[Figure missing]

The average tax payable per individual householder in Southwark that year was just one shilling, against an average of over five shillings for the stewholding couples above. That means the stewholders were being taxed at two-and-a-half times the rate of their neighbours and presumably that their earnings were that much higher too. But how much of that money actually found its way to the girls themselves?

Of the 137 unmarried woman identified in the Southwark return, Carlin’s found a dozen who she believes worked as prostitutes. These were not the girls who worked in the Bankside stews, who’d be lumped in as “servants” with the families above, but freelance whores operating from the precinct of St Thomas’s Hospital and therefore outside the Liberty’s rule. “These women probably were independent or ‘private’ prostitutes, working from lodgings rather than from public brothels,” Carlin writes. “Their residence within the hospital precinct presumably shielded them from any interference by the officers.”

Even among this relatively privileged group, only three of the twelve women paid assessments above the Southwark-wide average of one shilling and seven paid well under that. Their average assessment was only ninepence halfpenny – just over third of what even the poorest stewholder paid – and the richest girl of them all paid just one shilling and fourpence. Once again, it’s reasonable to assume that a much lower tax bill means a much lower income too.

Whoever else was getting rich from the Bankside stews, then, it sure wasn’t the girls who worked there. The eminent men who owned brothels like The Cardinal’s Hat, the Boar’s Head and the rebuilt Rose did very nicely from renting them out to stewholders, some of whom were able to start building family dynasties on the trade. These families certainly weren’t in their landlords’ class, either for income or status, but they still managed to rake in a great deal more income than most other businesses in Southwark could provide. The girls’ whose sheer bloody resilience kept the whole trade going had to make do with its scraps.<sup>(55)</sup>

Prostitution in Southwark was still officially licensed only in the Liberty’s

designated Bankside area, but the seven whorehouses there couldn't hope to satisfy total demand. At some point in the 1380s, local businessmen made a concerted effort to establish a new red light district in Southwark's St Olave's Parish, which lies west along the river from Bankside. The site they chose was not in the Liberty, but part of a manor still owned by the King himself, so opening unsanctioned brothels there was a risky business.

The men who owned the five new St Olave whorehouses included John Mokkyng, shown in the 1381 tax return as one of Southwark's richest men and Robert Power, the Bankside steward mentioned above, who now hoped to make his own step up into the landlord class. We know this, because both men are named in a 1390 petition from the people of Southwark complaining the St Olave stews had turned their neighbourhood into a war zone and urging King Richard II to shut them down. There had always been violence and disorder on Bankside too but, with neither the 1161 rules nor the Bishop's enforcers to keep a lid on things, St Olave's became a hellhole. "The petitioners charged that the place had become notorious, a breeder of quarrels and homicides and a resort of thieves, to the peril of local residents," Carlin writes.<sup>(56)</sup>

The petitioners added that the new brothels' customers included not only married men – who were hardly a novelty on Bankside either – but also "all manner of persons of religion, namely monks, canons, friars, parsons, vicars, priests". Married women and female servants, they said, were being kidnapped, imprisoned at St Olaves and forced to work as whores there. The alternative was a slit throat. The King responded by demanding that all the landlords and stewholders responsible for the five new brothels appear before him and his court at Westminster on July 4, 1390. One of the landlords, John Brenchesle, who seems to have run his own St Olave stew personally, was sent to the Tower of London, as was John Osteler, his servant. Four others, all of whom were either steward tenant-managers or their staff, went to the Fleet Prison for ten days.<sup>(57)</sup>

Efforts to police the stews at Southwark continued as the 15<sup>th</sup> Century got underway and it's this period which gives us our earliest surviving records of real cases passing through the Liberty's courts. Many of these involved the sort of minor offences which keep an English magistrates' court busy today, like breaching the licensing laws, public drunkenness or fighting in the street. Other charges were far more serious, such as forcing a girl into whoredom against her will or officials developing selective blindness whenever a bribe was offered. The Bishop's court convened every four to six weeks and kept its records on parchments called pipe rolls. Eight examples from the 15<sup>th</sup> Century have survived – all from the period 1446 to 1459 – and these show a steady tightening of the screw against corruption. By 1455, constables and bailiffs caught eating or drinking with the whores they policed faced a massive fine of £2.

Meanwhile, at the national level, three successive Kings – Henry IV, V and VI – each passed their own ordinances aimed at cleaning up the stews. First up to bat was Henry IV, who extended the Lord Mayor of London's powers in 1406. For the first time, the City of London's own police could now arrest criminals in Southwark – an area previously beyond their jurisdiction – and drag them back across the river to Newgate for trial. All this achieved was to stoke the good folk of Southwark's customary resentment at interference from London. Any City constable brave enough to try and exercise his new powers in the Borough risked sparking a full-scale riot, as we can see from an incident that followed just a few years later.

This involved a Frenchman who murdered a Southwark widow in her own bed, then fled to St George the Martyr's church in Borough High Street to claim sanctuary. London's authorities agreed not to arrest him on the condition that he leave England immediately and sent a constable to St George's to escort him down to the south coast

and make sure he caught the next boat out. But the outraged women of Southwark had other ideas. When the constable and his deputies came out of the church with their prisoner, they found a huge crowd waiting. “The women of that same parish where he had done the cursed deed came out with stones and canal dung,” one contemporary report tells us. “And they made an end of him in the High Street, notwithstanding the constable and the other men too. There was a great company of them and they had no mercy, no pity.” With the streets full of people like that, you can see why a lone constable might think twice before deciding to throw his weight about in Southwark. The new law was quietly shelved as a result.<sup>(58)</sup>

Henry V followed up with his own ordinance in 1417. He began by directing the Lord Mayor’s attention to “the many grievances and abominations, damages and disturbances, murders and larcenies” carried out by “lewd men and women of evil life” in the Bankside stews. Quite what the Mayor was supposed to do about it Henry didn’t say – beyond a peremptory command to sort it out.

The King’s own contribution was to ban London’s City aldermen and other respectable citizens from letting out any building they owned to tenants “charged or indicted of an evil and vicious life”. This was clearly aimed at the many churchmen, noblemen, City officials and wealthy merchants who happily rented out their property to known stewholders. There were only so many houses to be had in the Bankside’s licensed area, so anyone lucky enough to own a building there could command premium rents if he let it be turned into a brothel. Outside the licensed area – in Borough High Street, say – landlords could argue they were accepting more risk by taking an illegal stewholder on and insist the rent must be set higher to reflect this. Few other businesses in Southwark pulled in enough cash to match the rent stewholders could offer.

All this added up to a powerful financial incentive for landlords to accept stewholders as their tenants and that’s what the King’s ordinance was up against. It must have been simple enough to arrange your affairs to circumvent the new law – perhaps by renting your building out through a middleman - and like Henry IV’s measures before it, the ban had little effect in practice.

It was Parliament’s turn to step in next and it decided to concentrate on a different problem. By the time Henry VI came to the throne in 1422, the Bankside stews were at the peak of their profitability and the money flooding in allowed many stewholders to buy themselves freehold property elsewhere in Southwark. Some used these additional properties to open inns or taverns which doubled as illegal brothels in Borough High Street, but that was only the beginning of the trouble their new riches brought. In order to serve on a 15<sup>th</sup> Century jury, you had to be a property-owner, which was taken as evidence you had a stake in society and so could be trusted to treat your responsibilities in court seriously. This gave the newly propertied stewholders a whole new opportunity for corruption. By hiring out their services to the highest bidder, stewholders on the jury could deliver whatever verdict their paymasters required.

The stews at this time were dominated by a handful of powerful families, creating a network of useful connections which every stewholder could draw on when he needed to fix a court case. The Gardiners, for example, were involved in running three of the Bankside’s 18 brothels: The Lion, The Hart’s Horn and The Boar’s Head. John Sandes’ name is found linked to both The Castle and The Unicorn, while jobbing managers like John Gray and Robert à Murray moved regularly from one establishment to the next. “The Gardiner family is so prominent that the conclusion is inevitable that they were a gang of brothleers, as also the brothers David and Robert à Murray,” Burford writes. “All seem to have been people of some substance and some of them seem to have been elected constables on occasion.”



Most the time, bent jurors were engaged to ensure a guilty man walked free, but sometimes it worked the other way round. Among the examples Carlin quotes is that of Henry Saunder, who had been taken to the Bishop's court by a steward called Thomas Dyconson. Saunder asked that his case be transferred to the higher court of Chancery because the Bishop's jury he faced was packed with stewholders who were determined to falsely condemn him. Another petitioner, Agnes Johnson, complained that she'd been falsely accused in the Bishop's court. Her accuser, she said, was both rich and the court bailiff's brother-in-law, which meant no juror would dare cross him and so ensured she'd never get a fair trial. A third prisoner dragged before the court described the jurors there as "bawds and watermen, the which regard neither God nor their conscience". Only with these people in your corner, he complained, was there any hope of victory.

Parliament's answer to this was to pass a 1433 law barring Southwark stewholders from serving on juries or accepting any other official post in the Borough. Three years later, MPs heard an urgent petition from a group of Southwark citizens complaining that illegal brothels were still operating along the length of Borough High Street. "Many women have been ravished and brought to evil living," the petition said. "Neighbours and strangers are oft-time robbed and murdered." Parliament responded by declaring once again that stewhouses must be restricted to the licensed area provided – but gave no clue as to how this might be achieved.

In 1460, Henry VI set up a commission of 20 respectable citizens from both Southwark and London to consider the Borough problem. Violence and thieving in Southwark had now reached such heights that its own people looked ready to accept some help from London at last. For their own part, the City authorities realised that shovelling wrongdoers across the river and hoping the Bishop's courts could keep order there was no answer at all. Once, the fear of damnation had been enough to dampen some of the worst behaviour on Bankside, but now this ecclesiastical sanction was losing its power. "The impotence of the ministers and officers of the church was scarcely surprising," Burford writes. "The corruption and sexual licence of that body had bred such scepticism and contempt that even the constant threats of Hell no longer deterred those who sought some little sexual pleasure in this world."

Henry VI's commission recommended that the City of London send men into Southwark to remove any prostitutes or stewholders found operating away from Bankside and if necessary imprison them. The King seemed sincere enough in his desire to clean up the Borough, but the War of the Roses deposed him just a few months after the commission's report, so he had little chance to act.

The new King, Edward IV, took a more relaxed view of the stews – perhaps because his own sexual habits left him little room to criticise what went on in Southwark. The only significant measure he took to regulate them was a 1479 royal proclamation that all the licensed Bankside stews should clearly identify themselves by painting their riverside walls entirely white. Each house had its own symbol painted like a pub sign on the same wall and – as often as not – a couple of bare-breasted whores shouting from a riverside window to attract boat-bound customers.<sup>(59)</sup>

By the end of the 1400s, there was an unbroken line of 18 white-faced buildings like these lining the Thames' south bank all the way from London Bridge to what's now Tate Modern. Just five years later, every one of them was forcibly closed down in a 1505 crackdown launched by Henry VII. His action was prompted not by any desire to fight crime in Southwark, but by an unwelcome new guest which all the Bankside stews were now hosting. Syphilis had come to London.

## Chapter 8: The Invisible Gardener

About three weeks after the October vigil, I spent a couple of hours interviewing John Constable in a Borough High Street café, then asked him if we could retrace his steps on the night he first met the Goose. As we turned north from Little Dorritt Court into Redcross Way itself, he talked me through it all. The same trees he'd passed under that night overshadowed us now, the same Victorian railway arch glowered ahead and the same century-smoothed kerbstones echoed our footsteps. <sup>(60)</sup>

On our left passed Octavia Hill's 1887 charity cottages and the gardens where William Kirwan had strolled just before meeting his killers in 1892. To our right was the house once occupied by Victorian workhouse reformer Janet Johnson and – just a few yards ahead now – Cross Bones itself. The sky was darkening into early evening and the closer we came to the burial ground's gates, the more John Constable seemed to morph into John Crow before my eyes. I began to see what he'd meant about the 21<sup>st</sup> Century dropping away when you walked these streets. <sup>(61)</sup>

We paused at the gates so I could point out the handful of offerings I'd left there a few days earlier and examine the entry door for any fresh graffiti. As recently as 2004, Constable told me, security at the site was so loose that passers-by could sometimes find this door swinging open and pop in for their own casual tour. That's exactly what a local resident called Peter Porter did while showing an American visitor round Southwark in May that year, but what the two men found made a pretty depressing sight. Porter described their visit on a south London message board: <sup>(62)</sup>

*“Several diseased-looking dogs ran at us, barking loudly and frightening my guest. Then two men emerged from the old industrial building in the northeast part of the yard, both wearing dirty clothes and looking aggressive.*

*“One held a syringe of the type used for doctors' injections. The other brandished a metal pipe and began telling us to ‘F\*\*\* off’ out of their ‘f\*\*\*ing yard’ etc. With the dogs barking out of control, we feared for our physical safety. Then the man with the syringe started shouting at his companion, who retreated, muttering what sounded like death threats over his shoulder.*

*“The man with the syringe apologised for his friend, who he said was sick. He said that he and four or five friends were living in the sheds, that a couple of them had mental health problems and all had a drug habit. Then he asked us for some money. I said maybe, but could we see where he lived?*

*“He led us to the door of the large shed and we popped our heads in. After a few seconds, we withdrew for the smell of excrement was indescribable. In the room, I saw two women, one middle-aged and one younger, lying on what appeared to be piles of decomposing rubbish on the concrete floor. Our host explained that the older woman lived there and the younger one was ‘waiting for gear’. He then asked us if we wanted to score, as we were in the right place and there was some ‘wicked brown’ available.*

*“He then demanded money from us again. I thought it wise to give*

*him £1 and, as he accompanied us back to the gate, I asked what sort of facilities these women had. He explained there was no plumbing of any sort and they have to use the ground as a combined toilet, bathroom and kitchen.*

*“My guest has gone back to America to report that medieval conditions exist in 2004, a stone’s throw from London Bridge. A permanent resting place for thousands of humans is being defiled and desecrated. I have informed the police and the council about this visit in the hopes that something may be done.”* <sup>(63)</sup>

The area of Cross Bones which Porter’s discussing here seems to be not the burial ground itself, but the concrete yard directly inside the site gates - which now shows nothing but a bare surface and a lot of overgrown foliage. The graves themselves are a few yards south of this area, still within the Cross Bones walls but shielded from view. Whether it was Porter’s report that jabbed Southwark’s police and council officers into action, I don’t know, but soon afterwards the junkies were evicted and measures taken to ensure the door stayed locked. <sup>(64)</sup>

To Transport for London’s credit, it’s continued to allow Constable and his team enough access to let them help to keep the site tidy. On St George’s Day 2007, for example, the volunteers cleared rubbish from all over the burial ground and planted some seeds for the beginnings of a wild garden. That was when Constable first noticed that someone else had been hard at work there before them, clearing overgrown vegetation, assembling stones from the site into geometric sculptures and shaping the bushes into his own careful designs. No-one had ever seen this mysterious figure in action, so Constable nicknamed him The Invisible Gardener. Among the rumours surrounding this secret horticulturalist, it’s said that he began his connection with the site as a Network Rail employee, that he once lived in a caravan inside the Cross Bones gates and that he’s the dancing figure showing Geni707 round the site’s interior in a video that’s since disappeared from YouTube.

The Invisible Gardener finally introduced himself one Saturday in June 2007, when a lanky figure strolled up and shook Constable’s hand at the Cross Bones gates. “He actually revealed himself to me,” Constable said. “It was one of the least attended [vigils] ever, there was just me and one woman there. The Invisible Gardener just came up to me.”

Constable didn’t feel at liberty to give me The Invisible Gardener’s real name when I asked him, and all I was initially able to discover from other sources was that he’d been some sort of muse for the fashion designer Vivienne Westwood. The matter rested there till a PlanetSlade reader who knew I was working on Cross Bones got in touch. That e-mail passed on a link to a 2009 piece in *The Independent* profiling Andy Hulme, who’d met Westwood when she employed him as her gardener and went on to design the floral catwalk set for her 1994 *Erotic Zones* show. Towards the end of this piece, he shows the paper’s Emma Townshend a photograph which anyone who knew Cross Bones was sure to recognise.

“It’s a stark pyramid of brick in a wild open space, backed by railway bridges and a faraway glimpse of the Swiss Re building,” Townshend writes. “Straggly buddleias flourish in the Tarmac cracks. The pyramid is weighty and silent, giving shape to the neglected urban space. ‘That’s my garden,’ he says.” <sup>(65)</sup>

Armed with this information, I started Googling Hulme and discovered that his own Victorian country-gentleman look had inspired a whole menswear collection for Westwood in 2009, leading to profiles of him appearing in several national newspapers

and a host of fashion mags. Every one of these articles uses the word “muse” to describe his relationship with Westwood – exactly the word my first informant had chosen. One also mentions his run-ins with the police as a youngster, confirming the rebel streak he’d need to conduct guerrilla gardening on Cross Bones’ epic scale. *The Sunday Times*’ profile coyly refers to him having a Southwark ‘garden’, carefully placing that final word in quotation marks to suggest a hidden significance. <sup>(66)</sup>

Final confirmation came when I contacted Hulme himself and – slightly to my surprise – he gave permission for his name to be used here. “The anonymity and secrecy around that garden was not something I sought,” he told me. “However when I exhibited some photos of it earlier this year I did present it as the work of an obsessed security guard, now vanished, known as The Invisible Gardener. It seemed like a better story.”

Hulme has done remarkable work at Cross Bones, transforming the druggy hellhole Porter describes into a truly beautiful spot. The garden he’s created there would not look out of place as a setting for *Alice in Wonderland* or a forgotten park in *The Prisoner’s* Portmeirion. Here’s what one lucky group of gate visitors saw when they turned up for the Summer Solstice vigil in June 2008:

*“John Crow led the way through the secret doorway, a battered old building site door graffitied with the invitation to ‘Touch for Love’. Stewards in reflective tabards (the Goose Samurai), guide the 50 celebrants round the safe pathways.*

*“Crow shows us The Shrine of the Lost and Found, a circle of bricks surrounding a primitive stone cross with a red lantern at its centre. On the bricks are arranged a fragment of a jawbone, a plastic lizard, a broken pair of glasses, half a scissor, a green comb and a tangle of tiny coloured wires – objects found during a previous clean-up of the site by these informal Friends of Cross Bones.*

*“And Crow shows us the knot-garden, ablaze with poppies, in the shape of an eternity sign – or, more precisely, a double-diamond <><> - walled with rubble cleared from the site. [This is] enclosed by broken bricks and concrete chunks retrieved by The Invisible Gardener and his trusty sidekick Sidney from the aftermath of a previous Museum of London excavation.*

*“One of the larger chunks, from a more recent structure on the site, clearly shows bones and the crown of a skull protruding from the concrete foundations that ripped them from their resting place. This evening, bathed in the light of the setting sun, the gardens are vividly stained with red and black poppies.” <sup>(67)</sup>*

Maxcollective has an excellent flickr set of July 2008 photographs showing many of the same features inside Cross Bones’ grounds [here](#) – and a [second set](#) showing that year’s Summer Solstice in progress at the gates themselves. There you’ll see features like TIG’s white brick pyramid, as skilfully built as any dry-stone wall, the bush he’s carefully clipped into the shape of a dagger-pierced heart and the apple tree he’s lovingly grafted with mistletoe. Elsewhere in the garden, there’s a perfect topiary sculpture of a Scottie dog, a massive swing set constructed from old railway sleepers and much, much more.

All the sculptures, planting and topiary at Cross Bones has been done with great care, but nothing there is manicured into such antiseptic tidiness that it’s soul risks being lost. The site’s ramshackle magic is only enhanced by the imagination and outlaw

creativity which people like Constable and Hulme have exercised there. If Tom Waits has a garden, it must surely look like this. <sup>(68)</sup>

## Chapter 9: Farewell to the stews

**M**ost Scientists now agree that it was sailors returning from America after Christopher Columbus's voyage there in 1492 who first brought syphilis to Europe. The earliest reliable evidence of the disease on this side of the Atlantic dates from 1495 and one of the first cities hit was Naples, where Cesare Borgia caught the disease two years later.

Syphilis got its first toehold in Naples in 1494, when Charles VIII of France sent an invading army there to take the city from Alphonso II, its King. Both Charles and Alphonso's armies included Spanish mercenaries who'd accompanied Columbus to the new world. Men from both forces made extensive use of Naples' many brothels while they were in town, Alphonso's using the local whores to amuse themselves while they waited for the fighting to begin and Charles's to celebrate their February 1495 victory. We don't know which army provided the particular soldier who first infected a Naples prostitute, but by the time the French army returned to Paris, a great number of them were carrying the disease – and that's how its spread across Europe began. <sup>(69, 70)</sup>

Syphilis bacteria were still bouncing merrily round Naples when young Cesare arrived, sent by his father Pope Alexander VI to crown the city's new king. His chosen recreation among the city's whores produced a predicable result. "First a chancre appeared on his penis," Sarah Dunant explained in a recent article for *The Guardian*. "Then crippling pains throughout his body and a rash of itching, weeping pustules covering his face and torso. Over the next few years, Gaspar Torella [Borgia's personal physician] charted the unstoppable rise of a disease that had grown men screaming in agony as their flesh was eaten away, in some cases down to the bone." <sup>(71)</sup>

This was a world without condoms, penicillin or even the most basic standards of hygiene. But people did travel and this combination of circumstances ensured that syphilis flooded across Europe with Biblical ferocity. Like any new disease, its effects were particularly intense in the first few decades of its spread, as people's immune systems struggled to develop some resistance to a threat they'd never seen before. <sup>(72)</sup>

By the end of 1495, the epidemic had spread throughout France, Switzerland and Germany, reaching Britain two years later. In 1498, British travellers took it to Calcutta and by 1500 it was all over the Scandinavian countries, Hungary, Greece, Poland and Russia. Countries less visited by the Europeans, such as Africa, China and Japan, escaped infection only till 1520 or so. The death toll in Europe itself was counted in the millions – some say five million, some say ten – and there are estimates that as many as one in five people there were infected at the epidemic's peak. "I know of nothing of which I am so afraid," the artist Albrecht Durer wrote from Venice in 1506. "Nearly every man has it and it eats up so many that they die." <sup>(73)</sup>

The one thing people knew about syphilis in these early years was that it spread through sexual intercourse and that made it obvious that brothels were the single most important source of infection. Even a clean brothel would have been a serious threat to public health, but that threat was doubled by the primitive laundry arrangements prevailing in whorehouses at the time. One inspector checking a 15<sup>th</sup> Century Paris brothel found sanitary towels there heavily stained with both blood and a green discharge suggesting gonorrhoea. These were washed in what he called "a filthy tub" of sulphur or mercury solution, before being laid out on stoves to dry and then re-used. The procedure in Southwark was probably very similar and the changes introduced after syphilis arrived were not dramatic enough to make much difference.

Edinburgh was one of the first British cities to react to the epidemic, closing down its own brothels in 1497, but London dragged its feet till 1505. That was the year when, according to *Fabyan's Chronicle*: "The stews or common bordello beyond the water, for what happ or consideration I know not, was for a season inhibited and closed up. But it was not long ere they were set open again, albeit that where before were occupied 18 houses, from henceforth should be occupied but 12". The girls evicted from these licensed brothels either found work in the even filthier illegal premises elsewhere in Southwark, or else fled across the river to set up shop there. *Cock Lorell's Boat*, a ballad written in 1510, records their exodus:

*"There came a wind from Winchester,  
That blew these women over the river,  
Some at St Katherine strike aground,  
And many in Holborn were found,  
Some at St Giles, I trow,  
Some in Ave Maria Alley and at Westminster,  
And some in Shoreditch drew there."*

The "wind from Winchester" of course was the syphilis infection responsible for closing the Liberty's brothels. Most of the districts mentioned, including St Katherine's Parish, Ave Maria Avenue and Shoreditch, were then just outside London's City wall and so had spawned red light districts of their own where the Southwark girls knew they'd find work. Westminster's demand was provided by its proximity to the King's palace and Holborn's by the Inns of Court, where many of London's barristers both lived and worked.

All these places were near enough to Bankside for the girls to easily return there if Southwark's licensed brothels reopened and that's exactly what happened after just a few months. Some other European countries kept their own licensed brothels closed for years when syphilis first arrived, so why did London decide to take such a different route?

One answer may lie in the same exodus *Cock Lorell's Boat* describes. Ever since Roman times the Thames had served as London's moat, protecting it from all the chaos that went on across the river in Southwark. Closing the Bankside brothels had amounted to an invitation for every whore in Southwark to cross that moat and now they thronged the areas all round London's walls like a besieging army. Where once the thieving and violence spawned by prostitution had been safely at arm's length, now it was at the City's very gates.

Richard Foxe, who was Bishop of Winchester in 1505, must have been quick to remind King Henry VII of all this. The loss of licensing fees and fines from the closure of the Bankside brothels would have put a big dent in Foxe's income and yet done little to reduce the cost of policing his unruly domain. As England's Lord Privy Seal – one of the nation's five great Officers of State – Foxe would have had ample opportunity to lobby the King and bring his considerable influence to bear. And Henry had his own financial considerations to weigh too. In normal times, a good chunk of the money Bankside generated ultimately found its way into the King's coffers and his displeasure at losing this cash evidently outweighed any concerns about disease control.<sup>(74)</sup>

By October 1505, ten of the Bankside's licensed brothels were trading legally once again and producing fresh offences for the Bishop's Liberty courts to tackle. By August the following year, two more of the legal brothels were up and running. The only Bankside whorehouses still refused a licence to re-open were The Gun, The Swan, The Bull's Head, The Rose, The Bell and The Cardinal's Hat. It's not clear whether these

were singled out because they were thought to be the worst carriers of disease, or merely because they'd proved less able than their rivals to bribe their way back into favour. Most of them probably re-opened without a licence anyway, posing as an innocent inn or tavern but continuing their old trade in the shadows.

With the stews back in business and their licensing fees restored, the Bishop's forces concentrated on arranging Draconian punishments for any girl who continued whoring when she knew she was infected. Offenders were arrested by the bailiff and his constables, fined a whopping £5 and forcibly expelled from Bankside. In France, the treatment such women received was even harsher. Some Frenchwomen were simply executed for continuing to work as prostitutes in defiance of the anti-syphilis laws and others were soldered into an iron collar or whipped through the streets.<sup>(75)</sup>

In the days of the Crusades, it had been the death of so many male breadwinners in rural areas which drove women into prostitution, but now a second pressure was added too. The prototype "factories" which started to appear around 1500 had a devastating effect on the cottage industries many country women had relied on to survive. "Hundreds of thousands of the poorer women were thrown on to their own resources in an environment that had, as yet, no capacity to employ them," Burford writes. "By the time Henry VIII came to the throne in 1509, for countless thousands of women, the only remaining alternative was to peddle their bodies."

One of the new King's first moves to control prostitution came in 1513, when he commanded that any woman found soliciting among his soldiers must be branded on the face with a hot iron. Most likely, it was fear of syphilis that lay behind this proclamation, as Henry wanted his men fit enough to fight, not laid up in bed nursing their sores. Six years later, he followed up this measure by ordering Cardinal Wolsey to purge Southwark of its "vagabonds and loose women". Wolsey duly dispatched City officials across the river, where the 54 people they arrested in Bankside brothels included John Williams (one of the King's own footmen), Will Borage (a Yeoman of the King's guard) and David Glynne (a royal servant). This total's particularly impressive when you realise that Bankside's one small patch yielded as many arrests as all the rest of Southwark put together.

As with the Black Death of 200 years earlier, the fear of syphilis did little to dampen demand for the Bankside whorehouses. In 1519, John Skelton's morality play *Magnificence* was still able to refer to people who "runneth to the stews" in depicting a London he knew his audience would recognise. Latin grammars dating from about 1520 show that middle-class schoolboys as young as seven were routinely taught to translate phrases such as "He lay with a harlot all night", "Thou art a strong harlot" and "She is bawd to a whore". It was taken for granted that, as soon as they reached puberty, these lads would be frequenting the Bankside brothels like every other young man.

Ten years on from Wolsey's purge, Southwark was just as lawless as ever. In 1529, Bishop Foxe complained that the Borough gave him more trouble with criminals than anywhere else in his domain. The sneaky residents there, he said, were still "dicing and carding till past midnight and there picketh another's purse and doth resort them in and out at a back door". Later that year, the religious reformer Simon Fish smuggled his anti-clerical pamphlet *A Supplication for the Beggars* into England, attacking the church for its hypocrisy on sexual ethics. "Who is she that will set her hand to work to get threepence a day and may have at least twenty pence a day to sleep with a friar, a monk or a priest?" he asked. The Catholic Church responded by declaring his pamphlet heretical.

The Reformation which would transform England into a Protestant country and move so much Church property over to the Crown was now very close. Henry VIII



passed the first of his statutes breaking with Rome in 1532, continuing the process of separation with roughly one new statute every year for the remainder of that decade. In 1535, laws were passed to ensure that taxes previously paid to Rome went to the English Crown instead and Thomas Cromwell, the King's chief minister, set about assessing the taxable value of all Church property. The first statute transferring this property's ownership to the Crown passed in 1536 and by 1540 that process was complete. Often, the King sold on his new property to private landlords, who he was confident would make more productive use of it than the Church had ever managed to do.

While all the Reformation's changes were going through, Henry VIII also found time to renew his assault on the Bankside brothels. In 1535, he ordered that the Southwark stews be "as far as is possible publicly and entirely suppressed" because they harboured "unclean persons unfit to associate with honest men". His admission there that it was never going to be possible to completely sweep prostitution away is a telling one, I think. Like the illegal drug trade today, the Bankside stews offered people at the very bottom of society the promise of cash they could never dream of getting from any other source. As Fish's pamphlet points out, that made the risks involved worth bearing no matter what obstacles the law put in your way.

For proof of this, we need look no further than Robert Allen, a Bankside steward hanged at Tyburn in 1537. Allen had begun his working life as an ostler, caring for horses at a London tavern, but was sacked from that job after being charged with theft and what we'd today call grievous bodily harm. After a year in Southwark's Marshalsea Prison for failing to pay his debts, he managed to find some work at one of the Bankside's dodgier whorehouses and that's when his luck changed. Allen proved so valuable to his new employer that he was soon managing the establishment and made such a success of it that he was eventually able to buy property of his own. This brought him a handsome rental income of £40 a year and would have allowed him a prosperous old age if he hadn't allowed his vicious streak to surface once again. One of the other Bankside stewholders was a notorious drunk called Mrs Harrison, who Allen assaulted in 1537 and that's the crime that took him to the gallows.

The church's own venal behaviour had undermined its threats that sin led to eternal Hellfire, while honest employment offered men like Allen nothing but the prospect of endless, miserable drudgery and an empty belly. Who could blame him for choosing the stews' roller-coaster rewards instead?

Henry VIII took another whack at Bankside in 1546, this time giving his proclamation the full panoply of a royal trumpeter and a herald-at-arms. "Miserable and dissolute persons have been suffered to dwell in open places called the Stews and there, without punishment or correction, exercise their abominable and detestable sin," the herald announced. "There have of late increased such enormities as to invite vengeance of Almighty God and also to cause such great annoyance to the common wealth by enticing the youth to fleshly lusts. The brothel-keepers and their women must therefore, before the Easter coming, depart to their natural countries with their bags and baggage."

The phrase "natural countries" here means that Henry was ejecting not only the Bankside's foreign bawds and whores, but also any British ones from outside London, who were expected to return to whichever town they'd come from. The proclamation was made on April 13 and Easter Sunday that year fell on April 24, so they had just 11 days to pack up all their belongings and find a new home. In order to further hinder anyone who tried to continue operating a brothel on Bankside, Henry also banned bear-baiting on that side of the river, so depriving the stews' customers of one of their favourite interim diversions.

Most of those who moved out after the King's proclamation probably expected to

resume business as usual there once the fuss had died down a bit – just as they’d done in 1505. But the difference this time was that many of the former church properties the stewhouses occupied now belonged either to the Crown or to private landlords who were keen to develop Bankside for themselves. The new Protestant orthodoxy that ruled the English Church took a less laissez-faire attitude to prostitution than the Catholics had traditionally done, which also played its part in making it impossible for the Bankside stewhouses to re-establish themselves.

Henry VIII died in 1547, so he was cheated of the chance to see his proclamation’s effects work through in practice. How much of this he’d planned and how much was merely an unforeseen side effect of his other policies, I don’t know, but there’s no doubt that the combined effect of his 1546 evictions and the Crown property seizures going through at the same time succeeded in changing Bankside where every other sanction had failed. “The closure of the Stews in 1546 seems to have rid Southwark of most, if not all, of its professional prostitutes,” Carlin writes. “The parish register of St Saviour’s records no burial of a ‘single’ or ‘common’ woman after February 1547.”

By “professional prostitutes” here, I think she means those who worked full-time in Bankside’s licensed brothels. There would have been many other women selling their bodies illegally in Southwark too: some dipping briefly into prostitution when their funds were low, others staffing the unlicensed back-alley brothels. It makes sense to think that the licensed whores – who had no reason to conceal their trade – would be the only group the parish labelled as “single women” or “common women” at burial, so of course those designations would disappear when the licensed brothels were closed. If the parish had extended that description to every poor woman in Southwark who’d once opened her legs to put food on the table, they’d have had to apply it so widely it would have become meaningless.

No-one doubts that the illegal brothels in Southwark remained as busy as ever after the licensed whorehouses closed and now the red light districts across the river were thriving too. This fact did not escape Edward VI’s court preacher, Hugh Latimer, who preached a 1549 sermon on the subject to a congregation which included the new King. “My Lords, you have put down the Stews, but I pray you, how is that matter amended?” Latimer asked. “What availeth that you have merely changed the place and not taken the whoredom away? There is now in London more than ever there was on the Bank.”

There were more changes for Southwark in 1550, when the King sold London’s Lord Mayor and Sheriffs the power to “farm” the Crown’s recently-acquired Southwark lands in return for a hefty cash sum. This gave London the right to collect taxes in Southwark and granted the City some formal power over its outlaw borough at last. London’s authority still didn’t extend to the twin Liberties of the Clink and Paris Gardens, however and these did not succumb to London rule for another six years. That final blow fell in 1556, when all of Southwark was absorbed into London as the city’s 26<sup>th</sup> ward - known a Bridge Ward Without. Paris Gardens still formed the centre of London’s low-life gambling industry and Edward VI had allowed bull-baiting and bear-baiting to creep back in on Bankside, but the Liberty and its licensed stews were no more.

## Chapter 10: The Southwark Mysteries

“At one point, Jesus was admonished by St Peter for his swearing and responded ‘In the house of the harlot, man must master the language’. At another, Satan, played by a female actor, strapped on a huge red phallus before using it to beat his sidekick Beelzebub.”<sup>(76)</sup>

That’s an extract from the *Sunday Telegraph*’s review of Constable’s stage production, *The Mystery Plays*, which got its first staging at Shakespeare’s Globe Theatre and Southwark Cathedral on April 23, 2000. This date was not only both Shakespeare’s birthday and the feast day of St George, England’s patron saint, but also Easter Sunday. Getting his play staged at two such prestigious venues was no simple matter for Constable, who started by approaching Mark Rylance – then the Globe’s artistic director – and the Very Reverend Colin Slee, Dean of Southwark. “I wrote to Colin Slee and told him about *The Southwark Mysteries*,” Constable explained. “And he wrote back – quite guarded to begin with. Then I met Mark Rylance. They were very wary of me. Mark had just taken over at the Globe and I think he felt he had to be quite careful. He was representing an international trust, so he didn’t necessarily want a local turning up and saying ‘I’ve had this vision and now you’re going to do this play’ So we had a very rough ride to get there, but it did actually happen.”

Constable’s drama began with a band of Jubilee Line workers inadvertently raising the spirits of The Goose and John Crow while tunnelling at Cross Bones. Here’s how the production’s own website describes the action that follows:

*“Satan appears to announce the Day of Judgement and to claim the Whore (Goose), the Heretic (Crow) and the other wicked souls of Bankside. He unleashes Oliver Cromwell and his Puritans, who are in the act of closing the theatre when Jesus appears, riding a bike and bearing a radical teaching of mutual forgiveness.*

*“He recognises The Goose as Mary Magdalene, wrestling with Satan for her soul. John Crow is not so sure he wants to be forgiven, reminding Jesus of the abominations that have been carried out in his name. The first act ends with Jesus enacting a healing ritual, re-enacting his crucifixion on an operating table at Guys’ Hospital.*

*“The second act takes place in Southwark Cathedral, which has been taken over by Satan and his devils. They are in the process of inflicting horrible punishments on The Goose, Crow and the other lost souls. Their orgy of retribution is interrupted by Jesus bursting into the Cathedral. He challenges Satan for each of the lost souls, finding creative ways of forgiving them and embracing them into his Divinity. The Mystery Plays culminate in a vision of healing between flesh and spirit and between different cultures and creeds.”<sup>(77)</sup>*

His aim in writing the drama, Constable told one reporter, was to produce a modern version of the traditional medieval mystery plays, complete with their warts-and-all acceptance of human imperfection and the carnival atmosphere in which they were staged. These plays had religious content at their heart, certainly, but scorned all attempts at piety, and that gave Constable a perfect template for his own play. “It’s a sort of left-handed form of Gnostic Christianity, which didn’t come down through churches and

priests, but through actors and whores,” he told me. “There’s a very strong sense in the whole work that, through songs, through sayings and jokes, very profane activities, something sacred is being revealed.”

As the first production took shape, it was decided that its first, more controversial, act should be staged at The Globe and its second at Southwark Cathedral. Rylance himself was Constable’s first choice to play John Crow, but declined the role as he already had far too much on his plate. Constable stepped in to play Crow himself and director Sarah Davey set about casting everyone else. Among the major roles, Roddy McDavitt signed on as Jesus, Jacqueline Haigh as Satan and Di Sherlock as The Goose. Local volunteers and children from Southwark’s schools were recruited as extras, spear-carriers and miscellaneous crowds.

Constable kept up a constant to-and-fro with Slee as rehearsals got under way. The Dean was a fierce defender of the project against all outsiders, but never hesitated to let Constable and the rest know when he felt their plans went a step too far. Not all Slee’s notes were accepted by any means, but Davey did agree to his request that Satan leave her phallus in the wings whenever Christ was also on stage.

“In the year leading up to the play, the church went through one or two paroxysms about whether or not they should do it at all,” Constable told me. “And the day it happened, there was a huge thunderstorm half an hour before we opened.” That might be taken as a bad omen at any theatre, but it threatened utter disaster for an open-air one like the Globe. In the end, though, it turned out that God was only teasing: “Virtually the whole cast came up to me and said, ‘You see?’ And then, five minutes before our start time, we got a rainbow.” The play pulled in a packed house at both venues for this debut performance and was greeted with wild applause. Simon Hughes, a local MP who went on to become deputy leader of the Liberal Party, called it “the jewel in the crown” of Southwark’s Millennium celebrations and called for it to be staged again every ten-years.

*The Sunday Telegraph*, as we’ve seen, was less impressed. “A religious play staged in an Anglican cathedral has provoked fury after it featured a swearing Jesus and Satan wearing a phallus,” fumed the paper’s Jonathan Petre. “Satan told scatological jokes and told Jesus to ‘kiss my ass’.” Petre managed to find one member of the audience who was prepared to call the play “disgustingly offensive”, but also quoted Constable and Slee’s robust defence. “The message was that even the worst sins are not beyond redemption,” Slee told him. The play’s producers, realising that an outraged howl from *The Sunday Telegraph* was the best publicity they could dream of, splashed Petre’s article on their own website

In April 2010, the anniversary production Hughes had suggested staged a three-night run, this time using Southwark Cathedral alone and playing to over a thousand people. “I ended up playing John Crow at the Globe, but ten years later I got an actor to do it, which was always my intention,” Constable told me. “I got a six foot six black friend of mine to play it and he did it with great distinction.” If all goes according to plan, the play will next be staged in 2020 – hopefully with the Cathedral’s involvement once again.

## Chapter 11: Bardic Bankside

It's fitting that Constable chose a stage play to celebrate Cross Bones' history, because Southwark's been a cornerstone of British theatre ever since the 16<sup>th</sup> Century. Bankside can't claim either of London's first two purpose-built playhouses – those were both north of the river in Shoreditch – but it was home to the three most important theatres of the Elizabethan age and it's still one of London's liveliest districts for playgoers today. Within a mile of Redcross Way, either in Southwark itself or just across the boundary with Lambeth, drama is still staged every night at the National, the Old Vic, the Young Vic, the Globe, the Rose, the Menier Chocolate Factory, the Southwark Playhouse and the Union Theatre.

London's first two bespoke playhouses were The Theatre and The Curtain, opened in 1576 and 1577 respectively. The owners chose Shoreditch as their location because it was then just outside the City walls and so already the sort of disreputable area where lowlife scum like whores, actors and theatre fans might be expected to gather. Acting was considered a gutter pursuit in the 1500s - even a seditious one - so London's authorities wanted to segregate it just as they'd done with the city's licensed brothels.

For their own part, entrepreneurs wanted to build their new playhouses somewhere the law would leave them alone and where people were already in the mood to throw their money about a bit. Bankside answered everyone's requirements, so that's where the Rose (opened in 1587), the Swan (1595) and the Globe (1599) all made their home. It was the need to help supervise his company's construction of the Globe which persuaded a young playwright called William Shakespeare to abandon his rooms in Bishopsgate for new digs near the Clink prison. He was in his mid-thirties at that time and Bankside offered plenty of pleasures for a man of that age – particularly one who visited his wife and children back in Stratford so seldom.

After confiscating the Church's Bankside land in his Dissolution of the Monasteries, Henry VIII had given it to Sir Ralph Sadler, who then sold it on to a property developer called Henry Polsted. In 1552, Polsted leased out stewhouses like The Rose and The Unicorn to new tenant-managers, who continued running them just as before. Henry's changes may have removed the stewhouses' legal status, but there was still plenty of demand for their services and lots of money to be made. As had always been the case on Bankside, there were plenty of corrupt officials around who could be bribed to turn a blind eye when necessary, so the question of whether you were trading legally or illegally was largely an academic one. The loss of protection a licence had once afforded was inconvenient in some ways, but on the other hand it also swept away all the bureaucratic requirements that licence had demanded.

What little protection the 1161 rules had given the stews' customers was now swept away too. Robert Greene, who wrote a 16<sup>th</sup> century guide listing the dangers innocent country visitors would find in London, reminded them first about the perils of syphilis then warned against a scam he called "crossbiting". The idea was that the girl would pick up a respectable client, take him to her room and let him set to. At that point, her pimp would burst in, pretending to be the girl's brother or husband, hurl the man to the floor and start threatening to drag him through the courts for defiling this innocent girl. As he struggled into his pants, the client would become more and more terrified, finally throwing all his money and valuables at the two scamsters just so they'd let him flee.<sup>(78)</sup>

The Catholic Queen Mary I came to the throne in 1553, restoring that religion's more pragmatic attitude to whores. The heavy manners imposed on Bankside eased back a little as a result. If Mary's reign had lasted more than just five years, she may even have agreed to her churchmen's suggestion that Bankside's old status be fully restored. "[They] were very likely to have gained their suit if she had lived a little longer," wrote the 16<sup>th</sup> century priest William Harrison. "The Stewes, saith one of them in a sermon at St Paul's Cross, are so necessary in a common wealth as a jaxe in a man's house." (79)

Mary's leniency toward the stews was reversed when the Protestant Elizabeth I took over in 1558. She enjoyed visiting the bear pits in Southwark for her own recreation, though, and often entertained foreign diplomats there too. John Stow's 1598 survey of London tells us there were then two bear gardens in Southwark, each packed with the bulls, bears and other ferocious animals to be tormented. Each garden was surrounded by kennels, full of mastiffs trained to attack the bears and girded about with scaffolding for the spectators to watch and place bets on how long each animal might last.

Elizabeth also set her face against all new building in Southwark, which kicked the property speculation already rife there up a further gear and led to what houses there were being divided into smaller and smaller units. This made overcrowding in its tenement slums worse than ever. It was hard for Southwark's residents to fight back against decisions like this because, unlike other London wards, they were not allowed to elect their own representatives. The London authorities, perhaps remembering the corrupt juries of Southwark's Liberty era, assumed its people were such a criminal, unruly bunch that they simply couldn't be trusted with electoral power. Instead, London summarily appointed a couple of aldermen of its own choosing to represent Southwark and told the Borough to lump it. "Southwark had become a kind of satrapy," Peter Ackroyd writes in *London: The Biography*. "Thus ensuring that, almost till the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it remained a relatively undeveloped and ill-regarded place." (80)

The fact that London's laws rather than the Liberty's now applied on Bankside allowed the new Bridge Ward Without to treat its whores very harshly. Punishments included shaving the girl's head as a badge of shame, stripping her half-naked and whipping her through the streets, locking her in the pillory or a cage for public display, ducking her in raw sewage and then a sentence in the hellish Clink. For some observers, even this wasn't enough. "I would have some sharper law," Harrison wrote in 1577. "The dragging of some of them over the Thames between Lambeth and Westminster is a punishment that most terrifyeth them that are condemned thereto." (81)

Meanwhile, the poor women of Southwark had lost the only scrap of help medieval society once offered them. "The Dissolution of the Monasteries had the unintended effect of breaking the social safety net," the Southwark historian Patricia Dark told me. "If you needed a hot meal or a bed for the night and you had nowhere else to go, you could knock on the door of the local monastery. It wouldn't be fancy food and it wouldn't be a nice bed, but you would at least be kept from starvation or dying of exposure. When the monasteries closed, the bottom dropped out for a lot of people."

This change came just as England was beginning a century of rapid population growth (1550-1650), which threw more women on the streets than ever. One of the fastest-growing London wards was Southwark itself, where population trebled between 1555 and 1635 and much of this strain fell on the area around Redcross Way. Records from 1603 show that Cross Bones's own St Saviour's was the second most heavily populated parish in Southwark, with 37% of the Borough's people living there. Judging by the proportion of St Saviour's folks rich enough to pay "rates" – just 9.5% of the population against 28.9% in prosperous St Thomas's – it was also Southwark's poorest parish. Six years later, a survey of the Clink Liberty found that over a quarter of the

households there were desperate enough to qualify for parish relief, a benefit then reserved only for the poorest of the poor. St Saviour's churchwardens began complaining that they were expected to deal with more poor people every day and one of their major concerns would have been the increasing burden of so many pauper burials.<sup>(82)</sup>

Figures from a 1567 accounts book show that over three-quarters of all the people receiving parish relief in St Saviour's that year were women, suggesting what Carlin calls "a pattern of heavily feminised poverty". Philip Stubbes' 1583 pamphlet *The Anatomie of Abuses* gives us a glimpse of what this meant in practice. "The poor lie in the streets upon pallets of straw, or else in the mire and dirt," he writes. "[They have] neither house to put in the heads, covering to keep them from cold, nor penny to buy them sustenance."

This was the Bankside as Shakespeare found it when he moved there in the late 1590s: a broiling swamp of thievery, prostitution, drunkenness and rascality of all kinds. There were two theatres already operating there, two bear pits, a string of illegal whorehouses – some providing girls as young as seven - and countless pubs. Poverty and disease were rife in the Borough's muddled streets and every now and again a deadly fight broke out, but nowhere else in London could offer such raucous, edgy thrills for the city's wild young men.<sup>(83)</sup>

I asked Southwark historian Patricia Dark to help me think my way back to 16<sup>th</sup> century Bankside by offering some sort of modern parallel. "Was it like Vegas in the 1970s?" I asked. "Soho in the 1950s? Pre-war Berlin?" But she had a better comparison. "It's Tijuana," she told me. "Tijuana in George Bush Jr's day was where you went if you wanted to have a wild, wild weekend – lots of underage boozing, lots of hookers, lots of blow. It's that kind of seediness, combined with the Wild West's saloons full of raucous card games. Everyone's having a great time, but then you lay the wrong card and someone pulls out a gun."<sup>(84, 85)</sup>

It wouldn't have been a gun in Shakespeare's day, of course but a sword. There's no doubt most revellers would have come to Southwark well armed, as the British Museum's Neil MacGregor recently confirmed. Speaking on his BBC radio series *Shakespeare's Restless World*, MacGregor produced a dagger and a rapier, both Elizabethan and both recovered from the Thames just off Bankside. His guess was that they'd been accidentally dropped overboard (in separate incidents) by two of the drunken young men who stumbled nightly into the boatmen's crafts taking them back across the river after a good night out. "It's an impressive weapon," MacGregor said of the rapier. "The blade alone is well over a metre long and it's sharp on both sides and at the end. You can slash and pierce."<sup>(86)</sup>

Swords were partly a style accessory in those days, but any self-respecting young man would have felt obliged to arm himself for protection before setting foot on Bankside anyway. Once the drink started flowing, it was often these armed young men themselves who started the very mayhem they'd set out wanting to forestall. "Once swords become part of your dress as a gentleman, there is always the temptation to use them," the Wallace Collection's Toby Capwell told MacGregor. "If everyone is going to carry swords around all the time, they're going to come out pretty quick when there's some kind of argument."

Dark considered my suggested comparisons again. "There's possibly a veneer of Vegas in its heyday," she said. "But better, maybe, is Atlantic City during Prohibition. It's all shiny and glitzy and vaguely kind of glamorous, but there's always this undercurrent. If you're not careful, or if you're not lucky, or if you don't watch what you're doing, you won't make it back across the border."<sup>(87)</sup>

The theatrical company Shakespeare belonged to was called the Lord Chamberlain's Men and they would not have been naïve about Bankside's dangers. In

fact, they owed their whole move to Southwark and the glorious times they'd enjoy at The Globe there to a semi-criminal enterprise. When their Puritan landlord Giles Allen refused to renew the Lord Chamberlain's Men's lease on the Shoreditch theatre which formed their base, the company simply turned up one day in the Christmas break and dismantled the building without his permission. They shipped The Theatre's old timbers across the river to Bankside and used these to build the Globe on a new site they'd just acquired there. <sup>(88)</sup>

Two years before helping to steal this wood, Shakespeare himself had a run-in with the law on Bankside. We don't know the full details, but the trouble seems to have started with a perjury row between Francis Langley, the man who built the Swan Theatre in Paris Gardens and William Gardiner, a corrupt Southwark magistrate. It's thought that the Lord Chamberlain's Men played a 1596 season at the Swan after their lease on The Theatre expired and that's probably how Shakespeare got swept up in Langley's dispute. The historian Leslie Hotson believes Gardiner escalated the feud by threatening to close the Swan and hence endanger the Lord Chamberlain's Men too. <sup>(89)</sup>

Gardiner had a lackey called William Wayte, who complained in the summer of 1596 that four people had attacked him outside the Swan. He named his assailants as Francis Langley, Anne Lee, Dorothy Soer ... and William Shakespeare. When the case came to court, Wayte testified he'd been in real fear of his life. "By the standards of the day, it was a run-of-the-mill kind of brawl," MacGregor says. "The only remarkable thing about it is that we know Shakespeare was involved. The Shakespeare Four had to post bail and promise to keep the peace. They eventually settled out of court."

The first Shakespeare play premiered at the Globe is thought to be 1599's *Julius Caesar*. This ushered in a hugely creative period for our Bankside Bard, who wrote *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, *Coriolanus*, *The Tempest* and 11 other plays before the building burnt down in June 1613. That fire was started by a stray spark from the Globe's stage cannons, which caught light to the building's thatch during the premiere of Shakespeare's *Henry VIII* there. Fittingly, this was his final play. The company – now renamed the King's Men under James I's patronage - rebuilt their theatre on the same site a year later, where they continued staging plays for another 30 years. Shakespeare seems to have moved back north of the river in around 1604, but didn't finally leave London till 1613, when he returned to Stratford-on-Avon to retire. He died three years later.

Any writer living and working in an area as lively as Bankside was bound to find the neighbourhood's characters, history and atmosphere soaking into his work. In Shakespeare's case, he based the foolish Malvolio in 1601's *Twelfth Night* on Robert Brownes, an early headmaster at St Saviour's Grammar School and Sir John Falstaff in 1599's *Henry V* on an old soldier who'd once owned a Southwark inn. Sir John Fastolf, who lived from 1378-1459, really did fight with Henry V in France, but lost his reputation after the Battle of Patay in 1429. The English were heavily defeated on this day and many said Fastolf had escaped only through cowardice. He was later charged with profiteering from the French wars, investing the proceeds in property such as Southwark's Boar's Head Tavern. When Jack Cade's rebels arrived on Bankside in 1450, Fastolfe fled rather than face them. "Who hath honour?" he may have asked himself. "He that died o'Wednesday." <sup>(90,91)</sup>

Anyone who's seen Shakespeare's Falstaff in action will recognise this portrait. The playwright even named Falstaff's favourite tavern, The Boar's Head, after Fastolf's real Southwark inn - though he moves it across the river to Eastcheap. That's where the fictional Falstaff meets a sweet-hearted whore called Doll Tearsheet, who the Globe's Bankside audiences would have recognised as a familiar type. At any given performance, there would have been at least a dozen of Doll's real-life sisters either working the crowd



outside The Globe or dotted among the groundlings watching her antics on stage.

As far as the text of Shakespeare's plays is concerned, there's no more striking example of a Bankside reference than Gloucester's confrontation with Henry Beaufort, the Bishop of Winchester, in *Henry VI Part I*. Shakespeare based this scene on a real event of Henry VI's reign when those two men really were at war with one another. This happened in 1425 when the Duke of Gloucester was one of Henry's regents, ruling England on behalf of its child King. "In October, Gloucester persuaded the City authorities that Beaufort threatened an insurrection and London Bridge was barred at its southern end," *The Annals of London* explains. "The Bishop's men broke the chains and news of an impending fight spread like wildfire on the north bank. Forces soon confronted each other on opposite ends of the bridge, but the situation was defused by the mayor and aldermen."<sup>(92)</sup>

In Shakespeare's version of this face-off, Gloucester takes the opportunity to taunt Beaufort about his seamy duties on Bankside and slips in a punning mention of one of its biggest brothels:

**Gloucester:**

*"Thou that givst whores indulgences to sin,  
I'll canvas thee in thy broad Cardinal's Hat,  
If thou proceed in this, thy insolence."*

[...]

*"Under my feet I'll stamp thy Cardinal's Hat,  
In spite of Pope or dignities of Church,  
Here by thy cheeks I'll drag thee up and down."*

**Winchester:**

*"Gloucester thou wilt answer this before the Pope."*

**Gloucester:**

*"Winchester Goose! I cry, 'A rope, a rope!'"*<sup>(93)</sup>

There's another mention of Winchester Geese in 1602's *Troilus & Cressida* and this time Shakespeare is very explicit about the threat of disease associated with them. The speaker is a lecherous, degenerate old procurer, who looks the audience straight in the eye as the play ends and delivers this epilogue:

**Pandarus:**

*"My fear is this,  
Some galled goose of Winchester would hiss,  
Till then I'll sweat and seek about for eases,  
And at that time, bequeath you my diseases."*<sup>(94)</sup>

"Galled" means "covered in sores", so the reference to Winchester Geese carrying syphilis is clear enough. One theory about the rest of this epilogue is that Pandarus is teasing the audience by saying he'd like to stay and continue the story, but dare not do so for fear they'll wheeze their filthy, diseased breath all over him. Instead, he'll get back to the stews and send a bit of his own infection the audience's way later.

Leave The Globe with an epilogue like that ringing in your ears and you could

hardly help being hyper-sensitive to every cough and splutter in the crowd around you. Shakespeare's audience had more reason to be fearful than most, because plague was coming back to Southwark and this epidemic would put the Borough's graveyards under more pressure than ever before.

## Chapter 12: Going underground

CROSS Bones' modern era began around 1989, when Transport for London first drew up plans to extend the Tube's Jubilee Line out to London's massive new office developments in Docklands and Canary Wharf. The site at Redcross Way, then just a patch of derelict land, was one of the properties it acquired in preparation for this work.

John Constable had moved to Southwark about three years earlier, not because he had any particular interest in the Borough, but simply because he'd happened to find an affordable flat to rent there. "It was regarded as a very run-down and dubious area," he told me. "Taxi-drivers would not bring you home here and policemen warned me about drawing out cash. On the other hand, although it was quite beat-up, it was also an amazingly atmospheric area, with loads of interesting little twists and turns in the back streets. It was full of derelict warehouses and some of those had been either taken on as short leases or squatted. As a result, you had lots of artists' studios, unusual spaces and clubs operating."

This was the era of London's first warehouse parties and the beginnings of an Ecstasy-driven dance culture which would dominate the coming decade. Matthew Collin's 1997 book *Altered State* gives us a glimpse of what Southwark was like as the warehouse parties began. He starts with the story of Paul Stone and Lu Vukovic, who had been among the dancers at West London's groundbreaking Hedonism club and decided to create a similar event of their own. "They booked some rooms in a recording studio on Clink Street in the shadow of London Bridge," Collin writes. "In 1988, that warren of streets was dark, dilapidated, desolate and sometimes rather frightening. The only sign of humanity was the nearby market, which would spring into life just before dawn, the lorry drivers and traders bemused at the danced-out, dishevelled clubbers wandering home sweaty and exhausted."<sup>(95)</sup>

Stone and Vukovic called their club RIP (for Revolution In Progress) and created what Collin calls a "deliciously edgy" atmosphere there. Among the core DJs they used were Mr C and Eddie Richards, both of whom share their memories of the club in the book. "Every week, there were people trying to climb up drainpipes, giving backhanders of £20 to the doormen to get in, doormen having to fight people off with baseball bats and dogs because they were going to rush the doors," Mr C recalls. "Complete madness." Richards confirms this picture, contrasting RIP with more respectable dance nights nearby. "Clink Street was slummier, dodgier," he tells Collin. "Dodgier characters on the door, dodgier characters inside, a dodgier feeling about it. I think it was a bit frightening – really frightening at times."

Among the villains and thugs Mr C remembers thronging the RIP dancefloor were an equal number of the stylish rich, hip enough to know this offered London's most intense night out, dressed to the nines and pestering the acid house kids in their day-glo tracksuits for a fresh supply of pills. Clink Street and its surrounding Liberty had hosted this unlikely mix of rich, poor and criminal pleasure-seekers for centuries and now the area was pulsing with that old anarchic energy once again.

Meanwhile, just a quarter-mile to the south, TfL was surveying its new Redcross Way site. Excavations on the scale they planned would inevitably disturb significant archaeological sites all along the extended route, so regulators had insisted the Museum of London be given a chance to mitigate any damage caused. When the museum's archaeological team heard the Tube wanted to build an electricity substation at Redcross

Way, that's when they stepped in. "The site was known from documentary sources to be the location of a burial ground used during the post-medieval period," the MoL team wrote in its later report. "A small-scale investigation in 1990 was carried out by the Oxford Archaeology Unit which showed the documentary evidence was correct." The museum won permission to carry out a dig on the footprint of the proposed sub-station, but was given just six weeks to get it done.<sup>(96)</sup>

The five-strong MoL team got to work on the site in February 1993. They worked only on the sub-station's footprint itself – an area equivalent to about two-and-a-half tennis courts – and dug down just 10 feet. In this single "box" of earth alone, they found 148 skeletons buried. The museum estimates this to be "less than 1%" of the total number of burials made at Cross Bones, suggesting the site as a whole provided a last resting place for at least 15,000 souls.

All the human remains under the sub-station's footprint were removed at the conclusion of the six-week dig – not just those in the first ten feet but all the way down. Those in the rest of Cross Bones remain undisturbed. "We are now standing on untouched burial ground," MoL's Adrian Miles told a BBC interviewer on the site in 2010. "There are several thousand burials beneath our feet. All the burials were in coffins, but they're of the poorest standard that I've ever seen. You're looking at re-used wood – it's probably cheap wood that's coming off the docks."<sup>(97, 98)</sup>

The whole of Cross Bones covers only about 2,000 square yards, as Patricia Dark reminded me when we discussed the MoL's estimates. "It's not big," she said. "It must be absolutely chock-full of bones." The MoL's photographs from its dig confirm this, showing coffins packed so closely together that their sides are almost touching. Layer after layer of dead were found crammed into the Cross Bones earth, with coffins sometimes stacked nine or ten deep. The top layer was just a few inches below the surface. Only a few of the coffins had nameplates attached and even those were of such poor quality that they'd long since become illegible. As with the ramshackle coffins themselves, the families who used Cross Bones simply hadn't been able to afford anything more durable.

All the bodies were buried on their backs, aligned east-west with their feet at the eastern end. This custom was observed in the belief that, when the Resurrection came, the dead would be able to sit bolt upright in their graves and immediately see the glory of the risen Christ in the east. As we'll see a little later, one unforeseen consequence of this practice was to tell grave robbers exactly where they should dig in any particular plot to get the corpse out with minimum fuss.<sup>(99)</sup>

The museum's analysis of the 148 skeletons it recovered gives us a fascinating picture of just who was buried at Cross Bones. Because these were the bodies closest to the surface and because they knew Cross Bones' graves were so regularly recycled, the team assumed all the burials concerned had been carried out in the site's final fifty years of use. That put the individuals' date of death at somewhere between 1800 and 1853, a period which takes in the first 16 years of Queen Victoria's reign. "By the time we're excavating it, it's very much the poor ground for the parish of St Saviour's," Miles told the BBC. "The people who would be buried here would be the poor of the parish, bodies found in the river, people from the workhouse, people who couldn't afford to pay for their own burials."

Just over two-thirds (70.2%) of the skeletons uncovered were those of children, this group representing 104 of the 148 skeletons in all. At least 98 of those 104 children had been six years old or under when they died, reflecting this part of Southwark's very high infant mortality in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. In London's poorest parishes – of which St Saviour's was definitely one – as many as one in three children then died

before their fifth birthday. The biggest single group of children were the perinatal ones, who died either in their mother's final three months of pregnancy or within a month of birth. There were 50 skeletons like this in the 148 MoL studied, representing a third of the grand total and nearly half of all the children involved. Next came those aged between one month and six years (48 people), aged from six to 11 (two people) and aged 11 to 18 (one person). There were another three skeletons which the museum was confident had belonged to children, but which were impossible to age beyond that.<sup>(100)</sup>

The adult skeletons – 44 of them in all – were mostly aged between 36 and 45 (18 people), with the next most common groups being aged 46 or more (14 people), 26-35 (four people) and 18-25 (three people). There were five adult skeletons the team was not able to age any more precisely than that. Of the 39 adult skeletons it was possible to sex, 12 were male (31%) and 27 were female (69%). The biggest tranche of men were aged 36-45 at death (six people) and the biggest tranche of women aged over 45 (12 people).

Turning to the question of these people's medical history, the MoL's findings were these:

- **Periostitis was present in 89 of the 148 skeletons studied (60.1%).** This disease attacks the connective tissue coating human bones and causes severe pain. When a mother with syphilis passes that infection to the child in her womb, it can cause periostitis in the newborn baby. In a graveyard with as many infants in it as Cross Bones, that seems likely to be a major factor.
- **59 skeletons (40%) showed signs of osteoarthritis.** Osteoarthritis is still very common in the UK, but today it normally hits people over 50. Only 14 of the 140 people it was possible to age at Cross Bones (10%) got to more than 45, suggesting the disease struck much earlier than.
- **Twenty-two of the skeletons (14.9%) had signs of scurvy.** Scurvy is caused by a lack of Vitamin C and we know most of the people round Cross Bones had a very poor diet.
- **Eleven of the skeletons (7.4%) had signs of rickets.** Lack of calcium in the diet and a lack of sunshine cause rickets. People in the Southwark slums got precious little of either.
- **Twelve skeletons (8.1%) had healed fractures.** This category includes 50% of all the men and 14.8% of all the women. Industrial accidents and the violence of the streets may explain the high incidence of male injuries. No doubt Victorian Southwark had its share of wife-beaters too.
- **Nine skeletons (6.1%) showed evidence of treponemal infection, which is linked with syphilis.** Seven children and two women filled this category.
- **Three skeletons (2%) had evidence of surgery carried out at or very close to the point of death.** It's not clear whether the surgery killed them or whether they fell prey to Victorian anatomists.
- **Two skeletons (both children) showed evidence of histiocytosis-X,**

**which can be caused by toxins in the atmosphere.** Southwark was full of very dirty factories by 1800, which made the air and the water supply filthy. This group represented 1.35% of the total sample.

- **One skeleton (a child's) showed evidence of smallpox infection.** That's 0.7% of the total sample.

“The 19<sup>th</sup> Century parish of St Saviour's, Southwark, teemed with people – the poor and destitute, living in overcrowded houses with bad hygiene, drainage and waste disposal and an inadequate and polluted water supply,” the MoL's report sums up. “[This excavation] provides a window on a population struggling with harsh living conditions, who were poorly nourished and prone to infections and deficiency diseases. Most were buried in cheap coffins and this heavily-used, ill-kept and unconsecrated burial ground contrasts with wealthy parishes elsewhere in London.”

As the MoL team got on with the analysis that produced all this data, Constable was still exploring his new home. The National Lottery's Millennium Fund was pouring a fortune into this previously neglected stretch of the Thames' south bank and massive construction sites were springing up all around him. In 1993, building work started on Sam Wanamaker's replica Globe Theatre, in 1995 work began to convert the old Bankside Power Station into Tate Modern and in 1996 plans were announced for a stylish new footbridge linking Tate Modern to St Paul's Cathedral on the other side of the river.

“There was that real sense of things changing,” Constable told me. “I knew Bankside was going to change out of all recognition, so one of my inspirations for writing *The Southwark Mysteries* was wanting to capture the moment that I was living here. On the 14<sup>th</sup> of November 1996, I got a group of friends together including Ken Campbell and John Joyce, one of his actors. There were about seven of us – we were actually a writer's group. I took them on a walk I called The Mysteries Pilgrimage and we visited Southwark Cathedral, Shakespeare's Globe, Winchester Palace, the site of the Tabard. These were already in my mind as kind of magical places. The one that was missing was Cross Bones.”<sup>(101, 102)</sup>

Nine nights after that - on November 23, 1996 - Constable encountered the Goose for the first time and took down her puzzling verse: “And well we know how the carrion crow / doth feast in our Cross Bones graveyard”. A month later, the MoL began briefing journalists about its analysts' conclusions from the Redcross Way dig, prompting one newspaper to warn that further development could obliterate this endangered “skull and crossbones cemetery” altogether. That phrase made Constable think of the Goose again, so he went to the address the story had mentioned and instantly recognised it as one of his stops on that mad night with the Goose. “Told you so,” she whispered in his ear.

As Constable got on with writing *The Southwark Mysteries*, Bankside's growing rave culture was gearing up for the Millennium too. One highlight planned was a new production of Neil Oram's legendary 24-hour play *The Warp*, which Ken Campbell had first staged back in the 1970s. The new production was to be directed by Campbell's daughter Daisy in a network of interlinked cellars underneath London Bridge station. Organised with the help of techno-hippy guru Fraser Clark and his Megatripolis club nights, the play was supplemented by a 24-hour rave in the same set of tunnels. The first event was held at the end of May 1999, with fortnightly repeats running well into 2000. Sensing a group of kindred souls, Constable was keen to get involved.

“It was coming up to the Millennium and I was in a very Millennial mood,” he told me. “I'd been writing all this stuff about the outlaws and the tantric tribe returning to Southwark and suddenly there's all these alternative people – old sixties hippies, people

from the travellers' convoys, punks. They used to call it Glastonbury without the mud. You'd have the whole of *The Warp* going on for 24 hours. You could either sit and watch the whole show or – what most people did – you could come and go. You had three dance floors, all with different music, you had a chill space and a main performance-stroke-gallery place. I used to perform in there a lot. I was doing *Southwark Mysteries* stuff, Goose stuff there.”

The Megatripolis events had one more surprise in store too – this time a detail which linked Millennial Southwark neatly back to the Medieval bath-houses which had given the stews their name. “For about five of the parties they even had a giant hot tub, with everybody stark bollock naked,” Constable told me. It was as though the Goose had never been away.

## Chapter 13: Puritans and Plagues

Even before the bubonic plague outbreak of 1603, St Saviour's parish graveyards were full to bursting. "The air must often have been reeking with pestilential vapours," William Rendle writes in his 1878 book *Old Southwark & its People*. "One churchyard is filled, another spot close at hand is taken in and filled in its turn and so on, until the dead gradually become too many for the living. In 1573, the churchyard is enclosed with a substantial pale. 1594, 'the new churchyard'. 1620, 'the churchyard within the chain gate'. The vestry seems often to be looking about for burial places."<sup>(103)</sup>

The place names Rendle puts in quotation marks there are taken verbatim from the minutes of St Saviour's 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century vestry meetings and some think 1594's "new churchyard" was the site we now call Cross Bones. That's certainly the phrase used to describe it in an August 1760 lease from the Bishop of Winchester granting one Edward Pearson access to "a place called the New Churchyard and situate in or near Red Cross Street in the parish of St Saviour, Southwark". It's by no means certain that the lease's new churchyard and Rendle's churchyard were the same place, but Pearson's document does confirm that Cross Bones was still owned by the Bishop of Winchester as late as 1760, and that's quite useful to know in itself.<sup>(104)</sup>

Our first reliable glimpse of Cross Bones in the historical record comes in John Stow's 1598 Survey of London. I've already quoted from Stow's description once at the top of this piece, but it bears repeating here. He mentions the 12 stewhouses dominating Bankside after 1506, then says:

*"I have heard ancient men of good credit report that these single women were forbidden the rites of the church, so long as they continued their sinful life and were excluded from Christian burial if they were not reconciled before their death. And therefore, there was a plot of ground, called the single woman's churchyard, appointed for them far from the parish church."*  
<sup>(105-107)</sup>

Like everyone else who's studied Cross Bones' history, the MoL believes it's our Redcross Way site Stow has in mind here. That conclusion's supported by both 1795's *Histories and Antiquities of the Parish of St Saviour's Southwark* and by 1833's *Annals of St Mary Overie*. "We are very much inclined to believe this was the spot," the first volume's authors write. "We find no other place answering the description given of a ground appropriated as a burial place for these women; circumstances therefore justify the supposition of this being the place." The *Annals* are even more unequivocal, saying: "There is an unconsecrated burial ground known as 'the Cross Bones' at the corner of Redcross Street, formerly called the Single Women's burial ground".<sup>(108)</sup>

It's fair to conclude from all this that Cross Bones was already in use as a burial ground by 1598, when Stow produced his survey, and that it was old enough even then for only "ancient men of good credit" to remember its beginnings. That seems to rule out 1594 as the date for the first burials of all there, though it may mark the date St Saviour's Parish first took an interest in the site. Even by 1613, it was still not listed as an official parish burial ground, as we can see from a price list of burial costs St Saviour's published in that year. This mentions only the churchyard surrounding St Saviour's itself (now Southwark Cathedral) and the College Churchyard on Park Street. The tariff includes a



note that pauper burials can be conducted at the College ground, so my guess is that the parish didn't yet need Cross Bones for that purpose. <sup>(109)</sup>

“It became the parish poor ground in due course, though the exact date for the first parish interment in the cemetery is uncertain,” the MoL report says. “[The St Saviour’s price list] makes no mention of either the Cross Bones or the New Churchyard. This suggests that it was not in use as a parish burial ground at that time, though this does not rule out its usage as the earlier ‘Single Women’s burial ground’.”

We know from the St Saviour’s parish register covering 1538-1563 that the churchwardens there were already marking out the prostitutes presented for burial, which suggests they were somehow segregating those particular graves long before 1594. As Carlin points out, this register “carefully notes the burials of prostitutes as, eg, ‘Alys, a singlewoman’ or ‘Margaret Savage, common woman’, while taking only rare note of the occupation of others buried”. Perhaps it suited St Saviour’s to let these women be interred at a quasi-official graveyard in the Bishop of Winchester’s Clink Liberty? The Liberty governed every aspect of these women’s lives in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century, after all, so why not let the Bishop’s men bury them too and keep the parish’s own grounds untainted?

Whatever the history of Cross Bones before St Saviour’s Parish got involved, it was surely the increasing pressure on all Southwark’s burial grounds which led to the site being officially adopted. Plague took a heavy toll on the Borough throughout the 1600s and it was St Saviour’s paupers who bore the brunt. In the single plague year of 1625 alone, the parish had to find somewhere to bury 2,346 bodies, which Rendle estimates to be fully one third of St Saviour’s population. This load was further increased by the 17<sup>th</sup> century’s three exceptionally severe winters in London – those of 1608, 1615 and 1622 – which killed close to 300 people a week in the city and hit the poor hardest of all.

Taken together, these figures demonstrate both why Cross Bones has always been crammed so tightly with dead and why no skeletons from Stow’s time remain there today. “A widespread response to the growing shortage of space, especially in the inner city, seems to have been to pack the maximum number of corpses into the available ground,” Houlbrooke writes. “In so far as charnels were employed, it was in a more casual fashion than in medieval times. Where they did survive, their contents were probably treated with scant respect. ‘Our bones in consecrated ground never lay quiet,’ John Aubrey wrote. ‘And in London, once every ten years the earth is carried to the dung wharf’.” <sup>(110)</sup>

It was also the 1625 plague outbreak which prompted one Southwark gravedigger to complain he was out of pocket by £11 and 15 shillings because of the huge number of poor people he’d been forced to bury without pay during those years. The 1613 St Saviour’s price list I mentioned earlier shows that just the patch of earth for your loved one’s burial could cost anywhere from twopence (with no coffin) in the parish’s College ground to two shillings (for a coffin burial) in St Saviour’s Churchyard itself. On top of that must be added up to 16 pence for the Minister’s services, another 16 pence for the gravedigger and fourpence each for bearers. Even if you picked the cheapest possible option in every category, it would be hard to bury your loved one for less than three shillings and sixpence and that was a sum far beyond what many in St Saviour’s could pay.

“Burial fees often represent many days’ wages for a labouring man or woman,” Boulton told me. “And that bill would come just as family finances might be tighter than normal following medical costs, loss of wages and possibly the loss of a main breadwinner.” That’s why so many families around Redcross Way had no choice but to opt for a pauper funeral instead and accept whatever godforsaken graveyard the parish might consign them to. <sup>(111, 112)</sup>

Charles I came to the throne in 1625 and immediately ordered a clean-up of the

red light districts closest to London's walls. He left Southwark alone on that occasion, but attendances at its brothels, theatres and bear gardens were already declining. Although germ theory was still a couple of centuries away, people may already have intuited that the crowded, filthy streets of this very poor area offered more risk of infection than most. The prevailing theory at this time was that disease spread through foul air, so the stench of Southwark alone must have been enough to make many people fear visiting it. As with every outbreak of plague that century, anyone rich enough to flee London for the countryside did so with all possible speed.<sup>(113)</sup>

The plague returned more virulent than ever in 1630 and this time the authorities reacted by ordering Bankside's theatres, bear pits and other amusements to close down until the disease had retreated again. The idea seems to have been to discourage people from gathering in large crowds or – if they must do so – to choose a less disease-ridden borough than Southwark for their revels. The authorities had always viewed actors and playwrights as a potentially seditious lot, so silencing their voice may have also appealed for that reason.

Indirectly, these closures hit the brothels too. "If the pattern of previous outbreaks was followed, it could be expected that the normal 'let us be merry for tomorrow we die,' attitude would enable the prostitutes to carry on," Burford writes. "But on this occasion, the deaths from plague were very numerous and doubtless everybody who could get away did so. The Bankside never fully recovered from this blow." Another closure of the theatres followed in 1640 and then – the big one – in 1665. Before we get to that terrible year, though, there's the little matter of the English Civil War to deal with.

This war had been brewing ever since 1629, when Charles I dissolved the English Parliament for defying his financial and religious policies, then began an 11-year period of direct personal rule. He was forced to reconvene Parliament in April 1640 because he needed it to grant him money for his battles against the Scots, but once again MPs refused him and Charles dissolved their assembly after just one month. When he tried again that November, a zealous group of Protestant/Puritan MPs – many of whom suspected Charles was a secret Catholic – used the Parliament's gathering to voice angry complaints against him.

Relations between the King and his Parliament sank still further in January 1642, when Charles marched his men into the House of Commons and attempted to arrest five of its most troublesome MPs. They slipped away safely and Charles declared open hostilities in August that year by raising his standard at Nottingham Castle and inviting loyal subjects to rally behind him. The opposing Parliamentary army was led by Oliver Cromwell and the resulting conflict kept England at war with itself for the next nine years.

The same group of Puritan zealots who'd defied Charles in 1640 were keen to purge sinful pleasures from the land. They didn't limit themselves just to Southwark in this ambition, but naturally enough it was a major target. "In April 1644, Parliament closed all whorehouses, gambling houses and theatres," Burford writes. "The players were whipped at the cart-arse, fined for using oaths or sent to prison. Maypoles were pulled down wherever they could be found on the grounds that they incited the peasantry to lust. Nude statues, when not broken up, had their genitals covered with leaves and scrolls."

Southwark's taverns were left largely unmolested in this clean-up, if only because they were woven so tightly into people's everyday lives. Unlike every other policing body that had declared its intentions to clean up Bankside, the Puritans were fanatical enough to refuse the innkeepers' bribes, so any sexual trade that continued there had to move deeply into the shadows.

The Puritan forces in Southwark were supported by the hundreds of Dutch and Flemish Protestants who'd emigrated there since 1575. Despite their countrywomen's reputation for supplying Bankside's most expert prostitutes, most of the new arrivals were sober artisans, who'd begun to industrialise large parts of the Borough. They'd become more fiercely protestant than ever when Charles I took the throne – blame those suspicions about his Catholic sympathies again – and helped to ensure that Southwark sided firmly with the Parliamentary side when civil war began. And perhaps we shouldn't be surprised by this: no-one saw the violence and disease Bankside's seamy trade created more clearly than those who had to live on its doorstep.

Cromwell's army won a major victory at Preston in August 1648, charging the King with high treason and having him publicly executed in Whitehall five months later. His son, Charles II, who'd fled to Scotland, continued to fight Cromwell till September 1651, but his defeat that month at Worcester proved the war's last major battle. Two years later, in December 1653, Cromwell declared himself England's Lord Protector – a post that amounted to the monarchy in all but name.

Re-ordering Southwark under his new regime, Cromwell sold the old Clink Liberty's lands to a property developer called Thomas Walker. Walker added another chunk of real estate he'd bought from Southwark Manor and set about tearing down every building he found there to build tenements instead. This constant redivision of Southwark's housing into smaller and smaller units left the Borough a warren of packed tenements and dark, narrow alleyways strewn with both human and animal dung. Chamber pots were still the only form of indoor lavatory at this time and these were emptied from the tenement windows directly into the alley beneath. The rats which carried plague-bearing fleas to Bankside could hardly have asked for a better home.

When Oliver Cromwell died in 1658, his son Richard plunged the country into chaos by assuming he could simply inherit the Lord Protector's role as if it really were the hereditary Kingship. It was only after Richard had been overthrown and Charles II invited to return to England as monarch in 1660 that some semblance of order was restored. Five years later, we were back to the plague again.

It's the 1665 outbreak which we today call The Great Plague and there's no doubt that it deserves that name. Even the official Bills of Mortality admit that a total of 68,596 Londoners were killed by this outbreak during its 15-month run. That alone would make its toll over 10% of the city's population, but it's generally agreed today that these official figures seriously underestimate the true number of deaths. The more likely total in London over that period is 100,000 (or 15%) and, as always, it was in slum areas like Southwark that the infection spread fastest of all. <sup>(114)</sup>

In the midst of this outbreak, journalist Henry Muddiman wrote a letter from London to the Government minister Joseph Williamson. Muddiman reports that the city's burials in that week alone had reached 8,252, of which 6,978 were plague deaths. Samuel Pepys gives us similar figures in his diary entry for August 31, 1665. "This month ends with great sadness upon the public through the greatness of the plague," he writes. "In the City died this week 7,496; 6,102 of the plague". Both Muddiman and Pepys here were writing at something like the peak of plague deaths, but the fact that they're quoting the official Bill of Mortality's statistics means even these horrendous figures are likely to be an underestimate. Pepys acknowledges as much in the same day's entry, adding: "It is feared that the true number of the dead this week is near 10,000." <sup>(115, 116)</sup>

With so many bodies to be collected and disposed of, the parish authorities struggled to keep up, eventually resorting to stacking decomposing corpses in the street until their over-loaded carts could dump their cargo in the nearest plague pit and return for more. Collections and plague burials were first conducted at night to avoid public

alarm, but this restriction soon proved impractical. “The people die so, that now it seems they are fain to carry the dead to be buried by day-light, the nights not sufficing to do it in,” Pepys’ August 12 entry tells us. Three weeks later, on September 6, he remarks how strange it is to see burials conducted in broad daylight on Bankside, “one at the very heels of another: doubtless all of the plague”.

One plague pit in Aldgate housed over 1,100 corpses, which arrived with such relentless speed that they were being dumped in at one end while workmen still dug at the other. Daniel DeFoe, in his *Journal of the Plague Year*, tells us that in London “many if not all of the out-parishes were obliged to make new burying-grounds” and there’s no reason to think St Saviour’s would have been an exception. Lord Brabazon, writing to *The Times* in 1883, claims to have seen 17<sup>th</sup> century records showing that many victims of the 1665/66 plague were buried at Cross Bones itself, where “in one week upward of 600 bodies were interred”.

The combined effect of the puritans’ crackdown on Bankside, the repeated closure of theatres and bear-pits there and the unprecedented number of plague deaths in this latest outbreak was to end its status as London’s Trastevere once and for all. A few entertainments, such as bear-baiting and prize fights, resumed there after the Great Plague, but Southwark would never again have the critical mass of theatres, whorehouses, taverns and gambling joints which fed one another’s trade and made Bankside so much more than the sum of its parts. By 1682, even the last bear-pit had closed.

What we might call the professional whores had already moved north of the river back in Cromwell’s day, as had the most organised brothels themselves. The fact that so many poor women lived in Southwark ensured that casual street prostitution continued there as it always had – the women in question simply having no other means to feed themselves – but that was true of every other slum neighbourhood in London too. <sup>(117)</sup>

## Chapter 14: Crossbones Girl

In May 2010, BBC television's *History Cold Case* gave us our best character sketch yet of a real individual we know was buried at Cross Bones. Starting from an unidentified skeleton excavated there in the MoL's 1993 dig, the BBC's team slowly constructed a portrait of the person those bones represented. By the time they'd finished, the skeleton was someone with a confirmed gender, age, diet, likely job, health record and - perhaps - even a name. All but the last of these conclusions were firmly rooted in strict scientific analysis of the bones themselves and the undeniable facts this analysis produced.

The two women who led this work were Professor Susan Black and Dr Xanthe Mallett, both of Aberdeen University's Centre for Anatomy & Human Identification. Or, as the programme's narrator dubbed it: "Britain's finest unit for forensic investigation". The episode is called *Crossbones Girl*, it appeared in the programme's first season and can be bought in the iTunes store for just £1.89. If you want to watch it for yourself before encountering all the spoilers below, I suggest you scoot on over there and buy a copy now.

The most interesting part of the programme for our purposes came in the final stages, when skeleton CW1211 was finally given both a name and a face. In order to see how the team got there, though, we must first consider their forensic findings:

### **Date of Death.**

The skeleton was found very close to the surface at Crossbones, where the crowded conditions meant graves had to be emptied and re-used very frequently. This established the skeleton was interred there in the final few years before Crossbones' closure in 1853. <sup>(118)</sup>

### **Gender.**

Features of the skull like its brow ridges and its mastoid bones (which are found behind the ear canal) are much more pronounced in men. The team found no sign of such prominence here and so concluded that the skeleton was female.

### **Age at Death.**

An examination with the naked eye was enough to tell Mallett and Black that the skeleton's arm and leg bones had not yet finished growing, which meant the woman must have been well below 30 when she died. A subsequent CAT scan showed she had very recent marks of fusion and childhood growth in her bones, allowing the team to refine their estimate to an age of between 15 and 19.

### **Height.**

A simple measurement of the skeleton's leg bones put the girl's height at around four foot seven. "She's tiny," Black said. "Absolutely tiny." A report from Dr David Green of King's College in London, which provided much of the original research for *Crossbones Girl*, points out that even the average female convict in 1850 was nearly five inches taller than our girl. <sup>(119)</sup>

### **Social Status**

Short stature correlates strongly with poor diet and the low earnings and lack of education that implies. Mineral analysis of the bones confirmed the girl had eaten very little meat, but relied instead on whatever cheap bread and vegetables she could get hold of. This tells us CW1211 scraped a living on the bottom rung of Victorian society – just like everyone else who ended up buried at Cross Bones.

### **State of Health: Rickets**

The skeleton's leg bones showed the characteristic bowing caused by rickets, a bone-softening disease associated with lack of sunlight. "The rickets would have stunted her growth and made her susceptible to a host of infections, especially those of the respiratory tract," Green writes. "The smog that hung over London and often blocked sunlight from ever reaching street level meant that many children suffered from vitamin D deficiency, which accounted for the frequency of rickets."

### **State of Health: Syphilis**

The scars and pit-marks Black and Mallett could see all over the skeleton were textbook signs of advanced syphilis. The lack of telltale grooves in the skeleton's teeth ruled out the possibility that CW1211's mother had passed on syphilis while her child was still in the womb and this was confirmed by the fact that her skull had formed correctly in childhood. It follows that the disease must have been transmitted sexually.<sup>(120)</sup>

### **Syphilis: Age when Infected.**

The tertiary (third stage) syphilis shown in the skeleton develops anywhere from three years to 15 years after the first infection, though Mallett assumed a maximum ten-year term in CW1211's case. Combine that with the age data above and we see that she could have been infected as young as five. One possibility is that she fell victim to a particularly vile Victorian superstition insisting that a man could cure himself of syphilis by screwing a virgin. In the underclass of Victorian London, that often meant a child.<sup>(121)</sup>

### **Appearance**

Part of the nasal bones on the skeleton's skull had been eaten away by syphilis, which would also have left fluid-filled boils and scar tissue on the girl's face. Dr Caroline Wilkinson was given the job of reconstructing the girl's face on a computer screen and we'll see the results of her work later.

### **Likely Source of Earnings.**

Dr Patrick French of Guy's Hospital was able to tell enough from the skeleton to diagnose gummatous syphilis, a condition that normally arises only after repeated infection. "The general view is that it's probably re-infection with syphilis that causes gummata," he said. "STDs, including syphilis, were strongly associated with prostitution at that time." As the programme pointed out, about 20% of women in Victorian London

resorted to street prostitution at one time or another and now it began to look as if our girl was one of them.

**State of Health: Treatment**

The skeleton showed the extreme tooth decay associated with mercury treatment – then the only measure doctors could offer against syphilis. Further analysis of the bones revealed almost six times more mercury than the typical skeleton would have contained at that time, which strongly suggests CW1211 managed to get some treatment for her disease – probably at one of London’s charity hospitals. “The pattern of healing suggests she was living with [syphilis] for a long time and I think it’s unlikely that it killed her,” said archaeologist Fiona Tucker.<sup>(122)</sup>

We’ll return to *Crossbones Girl* in a moment, but first let’s get ourselves up to date with the state of Southwark when she was born.

## Chapter 15: The stink industries

The Great Fire of London in 1666 dealt another blow to Southwark's fortunes by making many of the shops and houses on London Bridge unstable, forcing their residents to abandon the area. Ten years later, Southwark had a disastrous fire of its own, which burnt down most of the remaining medieval inns on Bankside. By the time these could be rebuilt, whatever enthusiasm pleasure-seeking Londoners could still muster for Southwark had vanished. They turned instead to central areas like Covent Garden for their fun and the Borough began its grim transformation into a centre for "stink industries" such as vinegar making and leather works.<sup>(123)</sup>

The Thames gave these industries their power, their transport infrastructure and their means of waste disposal, but wealthy Londoners were keen to keep the noise and pollution they caused at arm's length. Just as with the stewhouses that had preceded them, the solution was to concentrate such filthy trades across the river in Southwark and let the slum-dwellers there endure the consequences. As recently as the late 1500s, Southwark dye-house owners had been converting their premises into brothels because they knew there was more money to be made that way, but the 17<sup>th</sup> century saw this process jammed into reverse. In 1633, a Bankside stewhouse called the Crane was transformed into a soap factory and 60 years later even the mighty Unicorn – once one of the two biggest licensed stewhouses in all of London – became a Southwark glassworks.<sup>(124)</sup>

"By the year 1700, the Bankside had lost almost every trace of its murky past," Burford writes. "It was turning into a bleak warehouse and wharf area, with a few dye-houses and a number of public houses serving mainly the watermen and labourers who loaded and unloaded barges and other vessels. A number of breweries had also been established in the immediate hinterland, surrounded by slums."

In 1750, London opened the newly-built Westminster Bridge, about two miles upriver from Southwark, ending the lucrative 500-year monopoly London Bridge had enjoyed as the Thames' only permanent crossing. A new bridge in this far richer and safer part of the city gave people yet another reason to turn away from Southwark, speeding the deterioration there still further. In 1756, the historian William Maitland said the old Clink Liberty was now "a ruinous and filthy slum", adding that the Kent Street and Mint Street neighbourhoods surrounding Cross Bones were its worst areas of all. That was the state of the place when the Bishop of Winchester granted Edward Pearson his 1760 lease on Cross Bones, and it's very likely that Pearson was representing St Saviour's Parish when he signed it.<sup>(125)</sup>

The anarchic ghosts of old Bankside continued to surface in the Borough, first in 1772, when the Magdalen Hospital for Penitent Prostitutes moved from its old Whitechapel premises to a new site in Southwark's Blackfriars Road and then with the Gordon Riots of 1780. It was also in the 1780s that the radical campaigner Francis Place – then just a small boy – watched highwaymen setting off for their night's work from Southwark's Dog & Duck tavern on St George's Fields. "Flashy women came out to take leave of the thieves at dusk and wish them success," he later wrote. It was commonly assumed that the decaying taverns around St George's Fields were the favourite meeting places for radical insurrectionaries of all kinds and the breeding-ground for all their plots.

The Gordon Riots burnt out two of Southwark's prisons – the Clink and the King's Bench – and the Clink was allowed to fall into disuse. Twenty years later,



Horsemonger Lane Gaol opened in what's now Newington Gardens, adding a public gallows to Southwark's traditional glut of penal institutions. This hanged a total of 135 convicts before it was eventually closed in 1878 and appeared as a woodcut illustration on many gallows ballad sheets. <sup>(126)</sup>

Although the new factories brought jobs to Southwark, these were both dangerous and poorly paid. "Work in the soap factories or brick kilns meant a 12-hour day in steaming conditions, risking acid burn and injury," Kate Williams writes in her 2006 book *England's Mistress*. "Many women believed prostitution less dangerous than factory work and more bearable than domestic service. We might think these days we would rather steal or beg. Beggars, however were usually attacked and crimes against property were so stringently punished that a girl who stole a handkerchief could be executed or deported." Prostitution on the other hand, had been downgraded from a crime to a mere nuisance in 1640 and what laws remained against it were enforced intermittently at best. <sup>(127)</sup>

Williams quotes figures claiming one in eight of all the adult women in London worked as prostitutes in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century – I'm assuming this includes both full-timers and those who merely dabbled in the trade when needs must - and I've seen other estimates suggesting about a third of this total were former domestic servants. Street prostitution in any age is unlikely to match the soft-focus *Belle de Jour* fantasy, but we should remember also that health and safety was unknown in the hellish factories of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and that conditions for domestic servants were little better. Girls as young as 12 could earn a living in the brothels of Georgian England, but housemaids that age received no more than a bare floor to sleep on and just enough table scraps to keep them alive. Even in adulthood, they were expected to work long hours for little pay and assumed to be fair game by their predatory male employers. When the alternatives were so utterly miserable, you can see how the move into prostitution may become a rational choice. <sup>(128)</sup>

At Cross Bones itself, it was now St Saviour's Parish which decided the site's future. Parish schools and graveyards have always tended to go together for the simple reason that both are generally built on Church land. In this case, a leasehold interest in the land proved close enough and that's how St Saviour's Boy's Charity School came to be erected at Cross Bones in 1791. Like the parish girls' school that followed 30 years later, the new building faced on to Union Street, but extended at the rear over a patch of Cross Bones' burial area that was already stuffed with dead. "By the 1820s, the burial ground was completely surrounded by buildings," David Green writes in his report for the BBC. "It was, like most urban churchyards, over-full and a serious cause for concern."

## Chapter 16: Say my name

The second stage of the BBC's *Crossbones Girl* investigation switched focus to Green's research among the surviving documents and he begins this section of his report with a summary of what we know so far.

"Short in stature, bandy-legged and pigeon-chested, this poor young girl then contracted syphilis which, despite treatment with mercury, clung to her till her death," he writes. "Whether the disease or the treatment killed her remains unknown: perhaps she was one of the many who died of consumption in that period, or perhaps she succumbed to one of the cholera outbreaks that plagued the area. Either way, she was in poor health for most, if not all, of her young life.

"This must have hampered her ability to earn a living and with her physical deformities and open sores, it would have been highly unlikely that she would have found work easily. If she turned to prostitution, she would have been one of many in the area who did so out of poverty rather than choice. Someone, however, paid for her treatment, so was she seen as a fitting object for charity, or did she have a benefactor who took pity on her situation?"

The girl's bones had been found very close to the surface at Cross Bones, so Green focused on deaths in the ground's final three years of use: 1851 to 1853. Only about 5% of the female deaths in London at that time occurred between the ages of 15 and 19 – our target group – and it was reasonable to assume that CW1211 had died in one of the five Southwark parishes surrounding Cross Bones. "Only 39 women aged between 15 and 20 were recorded in the death registers for the Southwark parishes of Christchurch, St Saviour's, St Olave, St Thomas and St John between 1851 and 1853," he writes. "If the woman in question was buried in one of those years, then it is likely she is one of those 39 individuals." <sup>(129, 130)</sup>

Trawling through the surviving records from Southwark's parish burial registers, hospital death books and workhouse registers, Green drew up a shortlist of candidates which included the following women:

**Amelia Hurley.** Died age 16. Buried by Christchurch Parish on May 14, 1851, in an unknown location. Lived first in Southwark's Upper Swan Court and, later, in the parish workhouse. "She was from a very poor family, even by the standards of those living in the same court," Green writes. "Her family would have been hard-pressed to bury her. Was this the woman who was buried in Crossbones Cemetery?"

**Maria Leonard.** Died age 20 in 1853. Recorded as a pupil at the School for the Indigent Blind in St George's Circus, Southwark, just two years before her death. Lived then in America Street, a slum area only 300 yards from Cross Bones. "Blindness was often associated with syphilis," Green pints out. "Could this have been her?"

In the end, Green plumped for a third candidate and updated Xanthe Mallett on his conclusions as they sat together on-camera in the London Metropolitan Archive. "Here we have the Dead Book," he told her, opening a large Victorian ledger. "The burial registers of St Thomas's Hospital in Southwark. It's a charitable hospital, it takes a lot of

poor patients and if she died in the hospital then it may be that she's in here." He turned the pages as he spoke. "We looked at the ages of the people who died and here we have this woman called Elizabeth Mitchell.

"She's aged 19," Green continued, pointing out the figures column by column. "The date she was admitted: 5<sup>th</sup> of August, 1851. The date she died: 15<sup>th</sup> of August. She only lasted ten days there. She's in the hospital in Magdalen Ward – that was a ward for women with venereal disease. And on the right-hand side is a column for medical remarks, cause of death: 'Ask the physician. Came in for discharge and sores, died under physician's care with pneumonia'." <sup>(131)</sup>

Keen to ensure we'd appreciated the significance of this find, the programme's narrator came in at this point. "Elizabeth Mitchell fits the profile of the skeleton," he said. "Aged 19, she came to St Thomas's Hospital ward for treatment of sores and discharge but died on the 15<sup>th</sup> of August 1851 of pneumonia. Next, David looks at the burial records of the parish of St Saviour's, where the Cross Bones cemetery was located."

Well, actually, no he doesn't – the ledger we see Green consulting at that moment is clearly labelled "St Thomas's, Southwark. Register of Burials", *not* St Saviour's. We'll return to that discrepancy in a moment, but first let's see what Green found inside. Turning the ledger's pages, he reached August 22, 1851, then ran his finger down the column of names. He stopped at the name "Elizabeth Mitchell" and the note in its next-door column giving her last abode as St Thomas's Hospital. "There she is," Mallett exclaimed. "Number 2090, St Thomas's Hospital, 22<sup>nd</sup> of August 1851, 19 years. Is Mr Day the minister?"

"Mr Day, the minister, he buried her," Green replied. "So she went from the hospital and was buried by the parish. Her abode was St Thomas's Hospital, so they didn't know where she lived." The most Green was prepared to say on camera was that Mitchell was "a possibility" as the Crossbones Girl's identity and Mallett too was careful to acknowledge there was no certainty here. "Obviously, we'll never know," she told the team when next updating them. "But this does fit with her. She's in the right [hospital] ward, she's the right kind of age." <sup>(132)</sup>

You can't blame the BBC for wanting a satisfying conclusion to a programme which they'd invested so much time, money and effort in making – and if they'd really wanted to deceive us, then that shot of the St Thomas register's cover would never have reached the screen. I didn't even notice the discrepancy until my third viewing of the programme, but once I'd done so I couldn't get it out of my head, so I contacted Green to see if he could shed any light. My question was this: Why would a woman who died in St Thomas Parish hospital, whose only known abode was in that hospital and whose interment is recorded in the St Thomas Parish burial register not be buried there too? If CW1211 really was Elizabeth Mitchell, then how did she come to be buried instead in the next-door parish of St Saviour's, where Cross Bones lies?

"That bothered me too," he replied. "I wonder if somewhere between the entry in the burial register and the actual burial, a change in burial place occurred? Elizabeth Mitchell fitted closest, though I have my doubts that it was her and without a very considerable amount of extra work, it would be difficult to prove anything more than a possible association." <sup>(133)</sup>

It's a little odd to think of parish officials filling in a burial register before the burial itself rather than afterwards, but given the chaos prevailing in Southwark's poorest graveyards when Mitchell died, I guess we can't rule it out. One possibility is that St Thomas Parish discovered at the last moment that Mitchell had some sort of family connection or history of residency in St Saviour's Parish, which allowed St Thomas's to unload the expense of a pauper burial on them instead. "Local officials were always

careful to enquire whether or not their parish had the responsibility to provide for a pauper,” Green points out in his report. “And to do so meant inquiring into the circumstances of an individual’s settlement.”<sup>(134)</sup>

He cites the example of Joan Chick, a widow with five children who found herself in Hackney workhouse in March 1848. Hackney discovered that Chick’s late husband Thomas, who’d died 15 years earlier, had once lived in St George’s Parish, Southwark. Joan and her children had lived in Hackney ever since Thomas’s death, but the St George’s link was enough for Hackney’s parish authorities to unload the cost of keeping them on St George’s workhouse instead.

If St Thomas Parish was able to discover Mitchell had some history making her St Saviour’s responsibility rather than their own, then perhaps that would explain the sort of post-mortem move suggested here. Sadly, most of St Saviour’s settlement records have been lost or destroyed, so there’s no way of checking. But what does it really matter which name skeleton CW1211 answered to in life? We know quite enough about her from the forensic evidence alone to see the rotten hand life dealt her and none of that’s going to change whatever her name was.

The programme moved next to Dr Caroline Wilkinson, the member of Black’s team tasked with reconstructing CW1211’s face on a computer screen, using the shape of her skull to infer the muscle structure it once carried. “We all have the same muscles on our face, but each skull is a slightly different shape,” Wilkinson explained. “Once you model each of those muscles in place, you will automatically get a different face shape with different proportions, because it’s the skull that dictates the muscle structure.”

Her first move was to take a 3D laser scan of the skull and load that into her computer where the reconstruction work would begin. “We need to know more about these nasal bones because there’s quite a bit missing,” she told a colleague as they stared at the screen. “That would obviously have an effect on what her nose is going to look like.” Soon they were beginning to build a recognisably human face. “We have a database of pre-modelled muscles and we import each one and then alter it to fit the shape of the new skull,” Wilkinson said. “The skull dictates the muscles’ structure and the muscle structure dictates the overall facial appearance. Then we can look at features like the nose and the mouth and the eyes and the ears and position those from looking at the shape of the bone.”

The next step was to model the damage syphilis had done to CW1211’s face and again the skull gave Wilkinson all she needed to go on. Matching the lesions on the girl’s face to the marks they’d left on the bone beneath, she set about colouring and texturing them for a realistic effect. “Some of them would become transparent, so they’d be fluid-filled,” she explained as she worked. “Some of them will be more hard and scar-like.” Rather sweetly, she also went to the trouble of building a picture of CW1211’s face as it may have looked without the syphilis. “Obviously, we had to estimate some areas – the nose for example,” she said as the second image appeared. “But certainly the facial proportions will be accurate.”<sup>(135, 136)</sup>

## Chapter 17: Resurrection men

The details in St Thomas Hospital's dead book tell us Elizabeth Mitchell was most likely born in 1832. That also proved an eventful year for those charged with managing London's graveyards, bringing not only the first of the four London cholera epidemics Green hints at above but also the legislation that ended a century of grave-robbing.

Doctors had always learned their trade by dissecting corpses, often using the bodies of executed criminals for this. No-one much cared what happened to bodies like that and, as long as students merely gathered to watch their teacher pick apart a single cadaver at the front of the room, Britain's hundred-odd hangings a year could supply the bulk of demand. Anatomists would still buy black-market corpses from corrupt sextons or gravediggers from time to time, but so far that trade remained small enough to be kept under some sort of control.

All that changed in the 1740s, when the Paris Method of instruction became standard practice in London's teaching hospitals and private anatomy schools. This required each student to be given body parts of his own to work on, meaning every dissection session at every school now needed not just one corpse to work on, but dozens. It was clear the Paris Method gave far superior results to the old system, so anatomy teachers had no choice but to adopt it – the teaching hospitals doing so because they knew it was essential to a proper training and the schools because students would desert them otherwise.

Most people still viewed the idea of dissection with extreme distaste, some even fearing that a sliced-up body might find itself inadequately re-assembled in Heaven, so no-one was going to volunteer their own dear departed for such treatment. That left no legal source of cadavers which could keep up with the huge increase in demand, forcing surgeons to turn to the black market en masse. A whole new tribe of professional grave-robbers were hard at work feeding this new demand in London as early as 1750 and their grisly trade grew rapidly as the city's reputation for surgical instruction pulled in more and more students from abroad. Even a surgeon as eminent as the Leicester Square anatomist John Hunter relied on purchasing fresh corpses from the so-called "resurrection men" at his back door and not asking too many questions about where those bodies had come from. Often, they'd simply been ripped from a nearby burial ground overnight. <sup>(137)</sup>

Grave-robbing in the capital peaked between 1800 and 1832, by which time as many as 200 students might be gathered in a large teaching hospital's dissecting room at any one session, each hacking inexpertly at the half-rotten limb or torso laid out before him. An accidental nick to their own finger or thumb could mean a fatal infection and yet still the pupils horsed around. Like all medical students, they affected a careless disregard for their work, treating the dissecting room like a senior common room where they felt free to eat and drink as the cadavers were wheeled in.

"On entering the room, the stink was most abominable," one lay visitor to William Osler's 19<sup>th</sup> century dissection room wrote. "About 20 chaps were at work, carving limbs and bodies in all stages of putrefaction and of all colours: black, green, yellow, blue. The pupils carved them, apparently with as much pleasure as they would carve their dinners. One was pouring [oil of turpentine] on his subject and amused himself by striking with his scalpel at the maggots as they issued from their retreats." <sup>(138)</sup>

The poet-to-be John Keats was an anatomy student at Guy's Hospital from 1815-1816, a period in his life which Donald Goellnicht addresses in 1984's *Poet-Physician*.

“While Keats was attending lectures on anatomy and physiology, he was also required to put his classroom knowledge into practice in the dissection room,” Goellnicht writes. “The bodies for dissection were bought, for three or four guineas apiece, from the body-snatchers, or ‘resurrection men’ who robbed local graves. This practice was carried on at night, the resurrection men bringing the bodies naked to the hospital in sacks, since stealing a shroud was a criminal offence, whereas stealing a body was only a misdemeanour.” (139, 140)

The fact that both Guy’s and St Thomas’s teaching hospitals were located so close to Redcross Way, combined with Cross Bones’ poor security and the sheer number of bodies buried there at minimal depth, made it an ideal target for the grave-robbers. We have testimony from real resurrection men at the time confirming that poor people’s bodies were always easier to steal because the rich were buried too deeply. It’s no coincidence, then, that London’s most notorious gang of body-snatchers was based in Southwark and named themselves The Borough Boys in tribute to their favourite hunting ground. “There are records of corpses being taken from St Saviour’s churchyards,” the MoL’s report confirms. “It is quite likely, given the vicinity, that bodies were obtained from the Cross Bones ground.”

In fact, there’s direct evidence they were. A report in the July 6, 1889 issue of *Guy’s Hospital Gazette* records this incident from 1786:

*“At the burying ground in Red Cross Street, named Cross-bones, belonging to St Saviour’s Parish, four men, ‘body snatchers’ or resurrection men, were at work and dug up a body and proceeded to put it into a coach and got away.”*

The same article mentions that St Saviour’s had been forced to sack and prosecute one of its gravediggers, William Dodd, in 1717 for “carrying away the corpses of persons buried and disposing of them to surgeons in order for dissection”. There’s no indication which particular St Saviour’s ground Dodd was using for his supply, but vestry minutes confirm the parish was already leasing Cross Bones from the Bishop of Winchester during the grave-robbers’ era. In 1788, the churchwardens there concluded that “the east side of the burial ground next to the common sewer” – a description fitting Cross Bones perfectly – was “open and easy of access to those who make an infamous and detested practice of stealing dead bodies”. They responded by offering a reward of five guineas for any information leading to a body-snatcher’s conviction.

Two years later, St Saviour’s replaced the broken-down brickwork surrounding Cross Bones with a new wall topped with broken glass. But, as Gillian Tindall points out in her 2007 book *The House by the Thames*, even this failed to do the trick. “In spite of these parish endeavours, it was reported [in 1803] that the Cross Bones ground had again been the target of grave-robbers, and that ‘Mr Cooper the sexton has suffered the keys, at times, to go out of his hands’,” she writes. “A door was to be blocked up and a new sexton appointed.” In 1819, the new wall at Cross Bones was supplemented (or perhaps replaced) with a five-foot spiked-iron fence.

David Orme, who sets a grave-robbing scene at Cross Bones in his 2012 novel *The Bodysnatcher’s Apprentice*, suspects neither the added walls and fences nor the fact that people lived so close by would have offered any real protection. “Most of the worst burial grounds in London were surrounded by tenements and yet body-snatching went on,” he reminded me. “Many resurrectionists were in league with the gravediggers, so extensive noisy digging wasn’t necessarily required.” Knowing they could expect little help from the authorities, poor families sometimes tried to protect their own burial

grounds by laying trip-wires or even mantraps there to hinder unwary thieves. The worst of these were the spring-loaded traps normally used to combat poachers, which snapped their vicious spiked teeth into the leg of anyone who stepped inside. We've no record this was done at Cross Bones, but it would certainly have been a prime candidate for such traps. <sup>(141, 142)</sup>

The custom that all bodies were buried on an east-west alignment with their feet at the eastern end told the thieves all they needed to know to extract a cadaver from the ground with minimum fuss. Any grave filled in the past day or two would still be visible as a patch of recently disturbed earth and the corpse's shoulders could always be found about 18 inches from that patch's western end.

"They would dig down to the wider part of the coffin, get a crowbar under the lid and lever it until it split," Dorothy Davies says in her 2007 essay *The Corpse King*. "The packed earth would hold the rest of the lid down. Then a rope was tied around the body under the armpits and it was pulled out." Orme has his own grave-robber, Bill Baines, using exactly this technique during a nocturnal visit to Cross Bones in 1825. "The body-snatcher's skill was to dig as little as possible and pull the corpse out through a small hole in the head end," he explains. "Feet first was harder, as hands and arms got jammed as you tried to wriggle it out". <sup>(143, 144)</sup>

Refrigerated morgues were still unknown at this time, which meant there was no market for dead bodies in the hot summer months, when they simply rotted too quickly to be worth buying. This created what everyone called a grave-robbing "season" running from August till April. One former resurrectionist giving evidence to an 1828 House of Commons select committee testified that his one gang alone had supplied 386 bodies to the anatomists in the 1809/1810 season and another 359 in 1810/1811. A second witness, this one a former parish officer, told the same committee that he thought there were around 200 professional body-snatchers in London at the trade's height, creating fierce competition among rival gangs. "I have known them to fight in the graves," he testified. <sup>(145)</sup>

The resurrectionist here is not named in the committee's report, but the meticulous accounts he had to draw on suggest strongly that he was The Borough Boys' Joseph Naples, a former Clerkenwell gravedigger known to be the gang's bookkeeper. Naples is also thought to be the author of a genuine resurrectionist's diary later recovered and published by the Royal College of Surgeons. On one 1812 night alone, this diary records, The Borough Boys stole a total of 13 adult corpses and two children:

*"December 2, 1812: Met at Vicker's pub. Rectified our last account. The party sent out me and Ben to St Thomas's crib. Got one adult. Bill and Jack went to Guy's crib. Got two adults, but one of them opened. Took them to St Thomas's. Came home. Met at St Thomas's. Me and Jack went to Tottenham. Got four adults. Ben and Bill went to St Pancras. Got six adults, one small and one foetus. Took the Tottenham lot to Wilson, the St Pancras lot to Bart's."* <sup>(146)</sup>

The names there all match known members of The Borough Boys gang: Ben Crouch, Bill Hollis and Jack Harnett. St Thomas's, Guy's and Bart's were three of the biggest hospitals in London, of course, the first two in Southwark itself and the third (St Bartholomew's) just across the river in Smithfield. Every hospital in London then had a graveyard of its own, known as a "crib" in underworld slang, so it's clear that Naples and his friends were selling these corpses straight back to the selfsame hospitals that had buried them a day or two earlier. The "opened" corpse he mentions was one already

operated on in hospital, and hence of little (if any) value to the anatomists. “Wilson” was James Wilson, who ran a private anatomy school in Soho’s Great Windmill Street.

It’s interesting to note that the Guy’s crib bodies were sold at St Thomas’s - and perhaps vice-versa - presumably to ensure that dead individuals could not be recognised by the doctors who’d treated them in life. Turning a blind eye to the source of these bodies would have been one thing for the doctors involved, having it rubbed in their faces quite another.

It would obviously have made a lot more sense to let the hospitals simply pass unclaimed bodies from the wards where they died directly to the anatomy students in their own dissection room, but that would have required a change to the law which public opinion still ruled out. For most people, the rational arguments in favour of dissection and the medical advances it brought were far outweighed by their instinctive disgust at the whole process. Even when surgeons reassured people that all the bodies they used in dissection sessions were later given a decent Christian burial, it didn’t help.

This left successive governments unwilling to pass laws giving surgeons legitimate access to all the cadavers they needed – and so removing the body-snatchers’ market at a stroke – but also reluctant to enforce the law as it stood. Crushing the body-snatchers’ trade without putting a legitimate supply of corpses in its place would not only have destroyed Britain’s reputation for continued medical innovation, but also have robbed London’s economy of the hundreds of foreign students who came there every year to study anatomy. The result was deadlock, with the police taking action only when someone like The Borough Boy’s ham-fisted Tom Light made himself impossible to ignore, or when a specific case was dropped directly in their laps. That’s exactly what happened in the case of anatomist Joshua Brookes, who repeatedly ran into trouble because he just couldn’t get along with the resurrection men he used.

One year Brookes, the owner of a private anatomy school in Mayfair, refused to give his regular gang of suppliers their traditional August gratuity, so they dumped one very ripe corpse in plain sight outside the door of his Blenheim Street school and another outside his home at the corner of Poland Street and Great Marlborough Street in the heart of Soho. When a couple of young women stumbled across the Soho body early next morning, their screams raised an angry mob outside Brookes’ front door and it was only the quick intervention of coppers from the nearby Marlborough Police Court that saved him a beating.

On another occasion, Brookes used a rival gang, paying a hefty 16 guineas to buy a body they’d stolen from an undertaker in St Saviour’s parish. His regular suppliers, angry at this lack of loyalty, shopped him at Union Street police station and suggested to PC James Glennon there that he might like to search Brookes’ Blenheim Street premises. Brookes was part-way through cutting away the body’s identifying tattoo when Glennon arrived, identified the corpse with ease and ensured its return to Southwark for a proper burial.<sup>(147)</sup>

The St Saviour’s undertaker was later found to have been complicit in its theft and served two years in prison for it. He’d taken a bribe from the resurrection men in return for agreeing to leave the body in an unlocked outhouse overnight, where they’d been able to collect it with minimum fuss. Brookes himself – who told police he believed the body was that of an executed criminal – faced no judicial punishment himself, but he did lose both the body and the huge sum he’d paid for it. Sixteen guineas at that time would be worth somewhere round £1,300 today.<sup>(148)</sup>

It’s the gang’s extreme reaction to Brookes’ slights which tells us just how much they disliked him. More often, the resurrection men would punish disloyal customers by breaking into their premises overnight and severely mutilating any corpses purchased



from their rivals. This rendered the bodies unusable for teaching purposes and so cost the surgeon they'd targeted a great deal of money. But for Brookes that clearly wasn't thought punishment enough - the gang wanted to be sure he got a good scare from the police too.

Brookes later complained that the same body he'd paid 16 guineas for in this affair could have been had for just two guineas back in his student days. New anatomy schools were opening in London every year at this time, their students were demanding ever-more practical experience as part of their training and it's this which explains the steep rise in price for every illicit corpse. As in any market where demand is growing faster than supply, the resurrection men were able to charge more or less what they liked.

One anatomy student writing in an October 1889 issue of *Guy's Hospital Gazette* recalled that some of his fellows had got so fed up with the body-snatchers' arrogance that they decided to take drastic action of their own: "The students for a short time became their own resurrection men," he writes. "That, however, lasted but a very short time, as they were cheated and duped on every hand, and ran in much danger of very rough treatment at the hands of the law besides."

Initiatives like this were never more than a marginal part of the trade, and that left surgeons no choice but to keep their own full-time suppliers happy. Often, they agreed to pay any court fines the resurrection man might incur in his work, or even to support his family while their breadwinner was in jail. Sir Astley Cooper of Guy's Hospital was particularly careful to protect Naples and the other Borough Boys, boasting that he had such influence with them as a result that he could obtain the body of any dead man in England he cared to name. <sup>(149, 150)</sup>

Crouch's men had the contacts to pull it off too. In October 1819, his gang arranged for two packages to be delivered from Chatham in Kent to a Cheapside pub called the Cross Keys, just across the river from Southwark. One was a hamper addressed to Joseph Wright in Old Street and the other a heavy item of some kind, wrapped up in an old carpet and addressed to Oxford Street's William Simpson. The innkeeper accepted both these deliveries off the Chatham coach, the coachman telling him Wright and Simpson's agent would be there to collect their property soon. All seemed well, until the innkeeper noticed that the parcel wrapped in carpet had begun to stink and decided he'd better open it.

"He found the corpse of an old woman," Brian Bailey writes in his 1991 book *The Resurrection Men*. "The local beadle was called and he opened the hamper, which contained a man's corpse. The coroner was informed and the authorities waited for someone to collect the luggage. It turned out to be a man who called himself Williams and having paid the innkeeper the bill for carriage he was arrested as he prepared to take the parcels away. He was, in fact, George Martin, one of Crouch's cronies, who was acting on this occasion on behalf of William Millard, the dissecting room superintendent of St Thomas's Hospital."

Richard Grainger, owner of the Borough's Webb Street anatomy school, told the Commons' 1828 committee that men like Crouch and Martin were "the very worst part of society", but said he was forced to meet their demands anyway. "For one resurrection man alone, I incurred an expense of £50, in consequence of allowing him a certain sum a week for two years while he was in prison," Grainger testified. "During the present season, I have expended several guineas supporting another man's family while he was in prison. These expenses fall not on the pupils, but on the lecturers, for if bodies are to be obtained, we must promise to take care of these men when they are in trouble."

Grainger was a surgeon himself and the solution he proposed for this whole mess was a new law stating that all cadavers not claimed by family or friends should be

routinely offered to the anatomists before burial. He set this idea out for the committee then and there, but it would be another four years before MPs mustered the courage to act. In August 1832 – nearly a century after the body-snatching phenomenon began – Parliament finally passed the Anatomy Act.

This ruled that all bodies deemed “unclaimed” or “friendless” should be given up for dissection. The controversial changes proved difficult to enforce at first, partly because people felt they targeted only the poor and partly because of the religious fears about dissection that many people still harboured. Some parish workhouses took an obstructionist line, some crooked officials still found ways to scam the system and the illegal trade certainly didn’t vanish overnight, but it was clear from 1832 onward that the body-snatchers’ days were numbered.

“The Act was successful in putting the resurrection men out of business,” the MoL confirms. “It is estimated that 57,000 corpses were supplied during the first 100 years of the Act’s operation. Ninety-nine point five per cent were from workhouses, asylums and hospitals, showing that the burden was indeed borne by the poorest. The Act left a long legacy of fear – that falling into poverty would mean the State claiming your body after death.”<sup>(151)</sup>

## Chapter 18: John Crow's megaphone

Nothing that happens in Southwark remains consigned to the past for long and that turned out to be as true for the theft of human remains as everything else. In April 1998, jurors at Southwark Crown Court heard the case of Anthony-Noel Kelly, a local artist accused of stealing body parts from the Royal College of Surgeons to use in making casts for his sculptures.

Kelly was arrested after showing the resulting work at a 1997 art fair, which alerted Sir Laurence Martin, Her Majesty's Inspector of Anatomy, to the sculptures' origin. He called in the police, whose search of Kelly's Southwark studio uncovered 30 stolen body parts. These included three human heads, six arms, ten legs (with the feet still attached), three torsos and a brain. He'd paid Niel Lindsay, an RCS embalmer, £400 to wrap these body parts in black bin-liners, smuggle them out of the college in his rucksack and deliver them to the Southwark studio after dark. The thefts, described by prosecutor Andrew Campbell-Tiech as "exceptional, unusual and macabre", were carried out between June 1991 and November 1994.

Geoffrey Rivlin, the judge hearing this case, was forced to grapple with the same issue which had protected so many body-snatchers in the past: under British law, only an item defined as property could be stolen and human remains were firmly excluded from that category. Rivlin's answer was to rule that the skilled work of dissection which the RCS had invested in the stolen parts effectively transformed them into college property. When the jury came back with a guilty verdict, Kelly and Lindsay became the first people ever convicted in England for stealing body parts. Rivlin gave Kelly nine months in jail and Lindsay a suspended sentence of six months. The lesson would seem to be that, if you want to steal human body parts in London today, you're probably safer targeting a graveyard than a hospital.<sup>(152)</sup>

Press stories like this have helped Southwark maintain its grisly reputation even today. There have been a host of features recounting the Cross Bones story in British newspapers since 1998 – many of which I've already quoted here – and a fairly regular trickle of items on London's local TV news programmes too. The BBC's decision to build that 2010 episode of *History Cold Case* round the site kicked TV's contribution up to a national level. All this media activity, combined with John Constable's tireless efforts to publicise the site's uncertain future, has ensured Cross Bones seeps a little further into the public consciousness with every passing year.

Novelists have also been quick to do their part. A simple search of Amazon UK's book pages turns up not only the David Orme novel I've already mentioned, but also Kathy Lynn Emerson's *Face Down Among The Winchester Geese* (2007), John Walsh's *Sunday At The Cross Bones* (2008), Kate Rhodes' *Cross Bones Yard* and Judith Arnopp's *The Winchester Goose* (both 2012). Orme's novel was published in 2012 too, suggesting the supply of these books is accelerating fast. Most seem to operate in the area where historical fiction intersects with either crime or romance novels.

For my money, Walsh's is probably the most intriguing book of the lot, telling as it does the story of Father Harold Davidson, the self-styled "prostitutes' padre" of 1920s London. I particularly like this little verse from the novel's frontispiece, which Walsh dates to about 1880:

**The Working Girl's Life**

*Monday in the nursery ward,  
Tuesday in the schoolyard,  
Wednesday painting lipstick on,  
Thursday going with George and John,  
Friday at the Crown with Billy,  
Saturday weeping down the 'Dilly,  
Where will she rest from her tears and moans?  
Sunday at the Cross Bones.* <sup>(153, 154)</sup>

Musicians have begun taking an interest in Cross Bones too, with the past four years alone producing songs about the place from Stuart Forester, John Crow, The Unbending Trees, Pillarcat, Gaggle and Cherry Choke – details of which you'll find elsewhere in this account. The KLF's multi-talented Jimmy Cauty chose a photo-montage poster called *Geese and Bones* for his own contribution, copies of which John Constable found him pasting to the Cross Bones fence one night in June 2008. He invited Cauty inside to inspect the site for himself and the two men evidently hit it off. "Jimmy especially liked John Crow's Shrine for Dangerous Helpers with its broken gin bottle and cigar tin, its black feathers, its hairy Patron Saint of Addicts and verses giving thanks for being 'set free from mental slavery'," the Cross Bones website says. <sup>(155)</sup>

It was also Cauty who suggested inviting Banksy - perhaps the most famous graffiti artist in the world at that time - to paint a piece on Cross Bones' surface tarmac, "so they can't dig up the bones without destroying his work". This floor mural (or "floral" as Constable dubbed it), could make a fine replacement for Banksy's 2002 *Chequebook Vandalism* piece on the Clink's outside wall, which Southwark Council foolishly painted over. "Sorry, Banksy," Constable told the artist when he wrote to him with Cauty's suggestion. "Please can we have another one?" <sup>(156)</sup>

In 2007, Constable also wrote to the Tate Modern on Bankside, playfully suggesting that it might want to buy the Cross Bones gates as part of its *Tate in the Community* project and then give them a permanent exhibition in the gallery. "Here is a unique, textured, living artwork, deeply rooted in the local community and the history of this site", Constable reminded the Tate. "[This site's gates are] the manifestation of a deep creative response to it, constantly changing as new artists contribute." The Tate replied politely that it could buy only works produced by a single identifiable artist – and preferably a recognised one at that. In May 2008, it put together an art trail through Southwark, inviting people to find the work of various Madrid artists sited along the way, but once again Cross Bones didn't get a mention.

And perhaps that's just as well. Rather than relying on the high art establishment, it feels much more fitting that Cross Bones should be immortalised by the ordinary people who find such inspiration and interest there. There are well over a dozen short amateur films about Cross Bones on YouTube, ranging from simple footage of the latest vigil to John Constable interviews and a cabbie's jokey ghost tour. As I write this in September 2013, the most popular of these has already racked up close to 17,000 views.

The effect of all this publicity can be clearly seen in the changing tone of developers' plans for the site they now call Landmark Court. As recently as 2002, Transport for London's documents seemed keen to deny Cross Bones' significance altogether, stressing that "the site has been previously developed", that "there is no reason why development should not occur in the future" and quoting planning inspectors'

remarks to that effect in TfL's 2002 Department of the Environment appeal. But any developer with an eye on Cross Bones now knows he must spotlight his determination to treat the site sensitively and be sure to include plans for a memorial garden there along with everything else.

Anyone hoping to get away with mere lip-service to these ideas will find Constable waiting to remind them of any promises they later break. His ceaseless campaigning for Cross Bones has given John Crow a powerful megaphone – and everyone knows he won't be shy to use on the Goose's behalf. "The only card we've got to play is public relations," Constable reminded me. "Ten years ago, when they talked about developing this site, they just talked about vacant land, derelict land – made it sound like it was just an eyesore with no significance at all. Now it's the Cross Bones Graveyard. That's a small, but very important achievement."

## Chapter 19: Seeking closure

Cross Bones' last phase of use as an active graveyard began just as the resurrection men's era was drawing to a close. Throughout the 1830s and 1840s, St Saviour's churchwardens would battle fiercely against health experts and poverty campaigners to keep the site open, despite clear evidence that it was spreading fatal disease through the nearby slums.

Realising in 1831 that the cholera epidemic already raging through Germany, Hungary and Russia was sure to reach London soon, the national government issued St Saviour's authorities with a list of urgent measures required to clean up their notoriously filthy parish. At the top of this list was a demand to sort out the disgusting state of their pauper burial ground at Redcross Way. "They didn't have germ theory really at that point, but they did know that dead bodies were not healthy and that it's not particularly great to have charity schools right in back of this heaving, enormous graveyard," the Southwark historian Patricia Dark told me. In his report for the BBC's *Crossbones Girl* programme, David Green adds: "The dominant theory of the spread of disease was that it spread by 'miasmas' arising from putrefying bodies and rotting organic matter. The cholera outbreak heightened those fears."

Cross Bones was one big miasma by this point, so St Saviour's created a committee to report on just how bad the over-crowding there really was and suggest what practical measures could be taken to alleviate it. The committee, set up in November 1831, convened again to draft its response on March 17 the following year and it's instructive to compare their hard-hitting draft from that meeting with the final report published. Here's a key extract from the draft, followed immediately by the same paragraph as it appeared in the final report:

**Draft:** *"The Committee are of the opinion it would be desirable to clear a small portion of the burial ground and make a depth of 12 feet at the least and place the old coffins therein and by that means provide more burial ground and that in future graves of not less than 12 feet at the least under the direction of a committee."*

**Final report:** *"The Committee are of the opinion it would be desirable to provide/make graves of not less than 12 feet deep under the direction of a committee."*

As the MoL points out, this final report seems to have been arrived at by the simple expedient of crossing out anything that looked too inconvenient or demanding in the draft. Quite what political in-fighting went on in determining these deletions, I don't know, but the end result was to eliminate any recommendation to clear the existing congestion at Cross Bones. Instead, it simply suggested that new graves there should be dug a lot deeper in future. It was St Saviour's churchwardens who ran the parish burial grounds and we must assume they were responsible for eviscerating the report in this way - because it's pretty clear the committee itself was not impressed.

In April 1832, with cholera now in London, the committee wrote to St Saviour's vestry expressing its concern. "Having viewed with much attention the Cross Bones Burial Ground, we find it so very full of coffins that it is necessary to bury within two

feet of the surface, which we consider, especially under the alarming disease now raging, very improper,” their letter says. “We also find that, on a partial opening of the ground, the effluviem is so very offensive that we fear the consequences may be very injurious to the surrounding neighbourhood. We are therefore of the opinion under such circumstances and the expectation of close, warm weather that the Ground ought to be immediately closed.”<sup>(157)</sup>

That seemed to hit home with the churchwardens, who decided at their next vestry meeting to empower the committee to close Cross Bones down, raise the level of earth there by bringing in additional top soil and re-open the site only when it was restored to a fit state. It was only a few days, however, before the committee realised that it didn't have anything like enough money at its disposal to complete the necessary work, so it simply chained up the gates at Cross Bones instead. That lasted about a year, at which point the growing pressure from so many cholera and typhus deaths convinced the vestry to put Cross Bones back into use. By the end of 1833, it was once again as busy as ever.<sup>(158)</sup>

Although London's total cholera deaths retreated somewhat between the epidemic spikes of 1832, 1841, 1854 and 1866, both it and typhus remained a constant presence in the city's poorest boroughs. In 1837, the London Fever Hospital named St Saviour's as one of London's “constant seats of fever from which this disease [typhus] is never absent”. In the following year, we have figures showing the parish's population as 31,711, of whom 1,856 (or nearly 6 per cent) were registered paupers. Two hundred and ninety-four of those paupers (16 per cent) are reported as contracting either cholera or typhus in 1838 alone, of whom nearly one in four died.

Both cholera and typhus are commonly contracted from drinking dirty water, so these statistics should not surprise us. Seven years on from the Government's order that St Saviour's must introduce some rudimentary hygiene to its slum neighbourhoods, the parish still had open sewers in every street and as many as 150 people sharing a single Mint Street lodging house. “In much of the low-standard housing of this period, disposal of waste from privies was a major health hazard,” the MoL says. “The inhabitants of the area were unwilling or unable to pay for the proper disposal of sewage. This led to waste being either directly dumped into the Thames, or in a cesspool beneath the floor of the house. Records show that solid excrement was often heaped-up to be sold.”<sup>(159)</sup>

As if all that weren't bad enough in a time of cholera and typhus, diseased corpses in St Saviour's would often remain above-ground for well over a week. Many of the poorest families in Southwark were Irish and wanted to observe that country's custom of holding open-casket wakes and having the family watch over a dead body for several days before burial. There was nowhere to lay out a dead relative except in the family's own very cramped living quarters, so that's the space they used. Lacking the money to provide anything but the most basic funeral in the parish's foulest burial ground, what other way did they have to honour their dead?

Speaking at about this time, the undertaker John Wyld said he had known poor families to keep a corpse laid out at home for weeks. “In cases of rapid decomposition of persons dying in full habit, there is much liquid and the coffin is tapped to let it out,” he told Sir Edwin Chadwick's enquiry into urban burial grounds. “I have known them to keep the corpse after the coffin had been tapped twice, which has of course produced a disagreeable effluviem.”<sup>(160)</sup>

At the pauper graveyards in any major British city, Wyld added, there would be many funerals scheduled for every hour of the day. “During last Sunday, for example, there were 15 funerals all fixed during one hour at one church,” he told the enquiry. “I have seen funerals kept waiting in the churchyard from 20 minutes to three-quarters of an

hour.” In cases like these, he said, the presiding minister would make everyone wait until the hour’s full contingent of funerals had arrived, say a hurried service over the whole bunch of them in one go, then watch them buried in a single trench. Some pauper grounds managed this process better than others, I’m sure, but if Wyld’s testimony represents the average state of affairs, it’s probably safe to assume that Cross Bones was even worse.

Accounts differ on exactly what happened to the site between its 1833 re-opening and the vestry meeting of 1839 which I’m about to describe. Some say the whole ground was closed again around 1837, some that it was only the most crowded area of all – known as the “Irish corner” – where new burials were banned. What we do know is that a two-year break in new burials in the Irish Corner allowed that area’s remains to be cleared away around the end of 1838, making room for about a thousand new corpses to be buried there in the future.

The sheer pressure of bodies requiring burial somewhere in St Saviour’s remained as heavy as ever so, in February 1839, the parish churchwardens met to discuss getting Cross Bones back into full use. One of those attending this meeting was a surgeon called George Walker, who later described its proceedings in his book *Gatherings From Graveyards*. “One gentleman argued that if the graves had been made deeper, hundreds more corpses might have been buried there,” Walker writes. “Another admitted that it really was too bad to bury within 18 inches of the surface in such a crowded neighbourhood; and it was even hinted that ‘the clearing’, viz. the digging up of the decayed fragments of flesh and bones, with the pieces of coffin etc, would be the best course, were it not for the additional expense. The fund of the vestry and the health of the living were here placed in opposite scales: the former had its preponderance.”<sup>(161, 162)</sup>

The vestry ended this meeting with a decision to pass formal responsibility for re-opening Cross Bones to the site committee it had created eight years earlier, but left the committee in no doubt what decision it was expected to make. Clearing Cross Bones completely was far too expensive to consider, but it was imperative to get the site back to full operation immediately. The committee had no choice but to agree.

As a medical man, Walker was outraged to see St Saviour’s parish finances put before its inhabitants’ lives like this. He was equally disgusted by the state of non-conformist burial grounds in St Saviour’s, including both the Quakers’ graveyard in Ewer Street and the Congregationalists’ ground (a former plague pit) in Deadman’s Place. Both sites, he said, were “literally surcharged with dead” and “present a repulsive aspect”. Walker also reports a conversation with one Southwark gravedigger – he doesn’t say from which particular ground – who admitted that new corpses could be buried in his graveyard only through “management” of those already interred. When asked what this management consisted of, the man became evasive. “He replied he would be a fool to tell anyone how he did it,” Walker reports. “It was observed to him that the place appeared to be dreadfully crowded and it was feared there was not sufficient depth. ‘Well,’ observed the man. ‘We can just give a covering to the body’.”

Valentine Haycock, another Borough gravedigger, gave evidence to a Parliamentary Committee on the health of Britain’s towns in 1847, where MPs asked him how his team had managed to cram 20,000 coffins into the bare acre of land at their disposal. “We dig ten feet and if we can get 12 feet we do,” Haycock replied. “And then we pile them up, one upon another, as many as the grave will hold, perhaps six or eight or nine in it. Then, when that is full, we dig another grave close by the side of it and put another nine or ten in there. They are piled one on another, just as if you were piling up bricks.”<sup>(163)</sup>

Haycock also told MPs that the worst moments of his job came when his shovel accidentally pierced the lid of an old coffin, releasing a stench which, he said, was



“dreadful beyond all smells”. In cases like that, he said, he was forced to clamber desperately back to the surface as best he could, fearing that his own death might come at any moment. “He told me that his eyes struck fire, his brain seemed a whirl and that he vomited large quantities of blood,” Walker writes. “This man deserved a better fate.”<sup>(164)</sup>

Walker tells us Haycock worked at “Martin’s ground in the Kent Road”, by which I think he means New Bunhill Fields, now the site of the Globe Academy school in Southwark’s Harper Road. The surnames of the two men who owned this non-conformist burial ground just off the New Kent Road were Martin and Hoole. Haycock testified to MPs that Hoole had also rented out space in the site’s bone vault, where bodies could be stacked for six months in return for a fee. He didn’t say what Hoole did with the bodies when the six months was up, but the clear implication was that any flesh not dissolved by a good scattering of quicklime in the vault would simply be thrown into a quiet corner of the graveyard itself to fester on the surface.

A London newspaper got hold of this story, reporting that Hoole’s vault was “over the shoes in human corruption” – meaning the slosh of half-liquidised human flesh there was deep enough to lap your ankles when you stepped inside. In his public lectures, Walker would delight in telling people about Hoole’s panicked reaction: “The fear of the press inspired him with a sudden desire to set his house in order. He came in from the country, worked in his shirt sleeves at the piles of decaying matter heaped up in the vault, went home ill and died in a few days.”<sup>(165)</sup>

London’s cholera deaths reached epidemic levels again in 1848 and, once again, it was Southwark which bore the brunt. The Irish potato famine which began in 1845 had brought even more poor immigrants to the Borough, where David Green’s figures show 43% of the housing was now in the slum category. “Middle-class ratepayers – and there were a declining number of those in Southwark – often chose to move elsewhere, especially to the new suburbs that were increasingly linked by public transport to the central districts, leaving behind an increasingly impoverished population that came to depend in ever-greater numbers on hand-outs and poor relief,” he writes. Board of Health statistics from this time show that cholera caused between 17 and 22 deaths per thousand people in Southwark during the 1848/49 outbreak, and that’s nearly six times the rate in more prosperous areas across the river.

Often, it was the disgusting state of Borough drinking water to blame. The two suppliers in this part of London were the Southwark & Vauxhall Waterworks Company and the Lambeth Waterworks Company, both of which took their intake directly from the most heavily polluted stretch of the Thames as it flowed through London. Huge amounts of raw human sewage and all kinds of untreated industrial waste were dumped in the Thames near these intake pipes every day and the suppliers’ only means of removing it before human consumption was to insert a few mesh filters in their pipes. In 1850, the doctor/scientist Arthur Hassall published the results of his microscope studies of London water, concluding that Southwark’s supply was “in the worst condition in which it is possible to conceive any water to be” and “the most disgusting which I have ever examined”. Lambeth Waterworks Company responded by shifting its intake pipe upstream to a cleaner stretch of the Thames, but the Southwark & Vauxhall company couldn’t be bothered.<sup>(166-168)</sup>

Southwark’s graveyards made their own contribution to befouling the Borough’s water too. “The subsoil of Southwark has always been porous, being made of earth, sand and gravel,” the former health officer William Rendle writes in his 1878 memoir. “The effect is a more or less free passage for the contents of burial places, cesspools and the like to wells in the vicinity.” Back in the 1850s, Rendle adds, he’d personally traced “evidence of the most offensive and dangerous percolation into the drinking water.”

All this evidence made it clearer by the day that the filthiest areas of Southwark must be cleaned up if the area was ever to have a chance of getting disease under control. But there was a Catch-22 at work. “Unless you close Cross Bones, St Saviour’s death rates will never decline,” said the health authorities. “With death rates as high as they are, closing Cross Bones is out of the question,” St Saviour’s replied. It was that simple paradox which kept the two sides at war for 20 years.

On August 13, 1849, England’s newly formed Board of Health forwarded two letters of complaint it had received about Cross Bones, telling St Saviour’s churchwardens that, if these complaints were well-founded and immediate action not taken to correct them, the board would step in to close Cross Bones itself. The first of these two letters came from Mariane Gwilt, who lived with her husband George in one of the Union Street schoolhouses protruding into Cross Bones’ land and her remarks are worth quoting at some length:

*“From the windows of the room called the school room, we have all this sickly Summer almost daily witnessed the most distressing sights. In the bone house with its open grating, which is not more than eight or ten yards from five of our windows, we have had sometimes from three to nine bodies lying in their shells for as many as ten days.”<sup>(169)</sup>*

*“One of those shells contained the body of a woman brought here supposed dead from cholera. The sawdust and shavings saturated with blood which washed out of the shell when the body was transferred to [its] permanent coffin was spread under our windows and is there now although this occurred three weeks ago.*

*“On another occasion three or four weeks since, the body of a man who had drowned himself at Blackfriars Bridge was brought down here and allowed to lie in its shell ten days. Whilst he laid there, the bodies of two children who had died of the cholera were left in the dead house the chief of the time. Then the [suicide’s] body was washed with a mop and pailfuls of water, the shell again washed out and all the filthy liquid, shavings and grass thrown under our windows. His clothes lie there at this time I am writing.*

*“Several medical gentlemen have averred to me that this burial place is dangerous to the health of this densely-populated neighbourhood. Our kitchen on the ground floor, with the school room over it, forms the wing which looks into this burial ground – the earth of which now comes at least four feet above the level of the said kitchen floor due to the number of burials which take place. This house and premises being my husband’s freehold, he seems quite resolved to live and die here notwithstanding.*

*“We are now both of us considerably advanced in years and my health has suffered materially these last five years. I have no doubt the impure air from this pestiferous locale injures the health also of the surrounding vicinity and earnestly hope that the remedy will at once be obtained.”<sup>(170)</sup>*

St Saviour’s churchwardens wrote a feisty response to this letter, kicking it off with a heavy hint to the board that Mrs Gwilt was a malicious cow whose evidence shouldn’t be trusted for a moment. They didn’t put it quite like that, of course, saying instead that “it is to be hoped” her “many erroneous statements” had arisen merely from “some misapprehension or misinformation” on her part. They went on to claim Cross

Bones sometimes went as long as six days without a single interment there and told the Board this was the first they'd heard of any complaints. Then they turned to Mrs Gwilt's specific points:

\* *“That the distance of the bone house is not great from Mrs Gwilt's windows has arisen from Mr Gwilt having built over the Common Sewer adjoining to the burial ground,” the wardens wrote. “[This] may be considered an encroachment on the burial ground - and no burials have taken place during the last eight years at a distance nearer to such rooms than 50 feet.”*

\* *In reply to Mrs Gwilt's charge that up to nine bodies had lain unburied in the bone house for as long as ten days, St Saviour's sent the board an extract from its bone house register. This listed seven people consigned there in the 20 days before Mrs Gwilt wrote her letter, the longest unburied of whom remained above ground for three days. He was Charles Shooter, the Blackfriars Bridge suicide, who St Saviour's said could not be buried straight away because of a delay in the coroner's inquest. <sup>(171, 172)</sup>*

\* *If the bodies Mrs Gwilt complained about had not been moved to St Saviour's, the wardens continued, they would instead have remained in the family's cramped living quarters until burial. “The [parish] officers have thought it most dangerous to let the bodies remain among the living, occasioning the spread of disease and therefore directed the body to be taken to the bone house,” they wrote.*

\* *“With respect to the lady's statement about straw and shavings, she is equally erroneous – straw and shavings being used only by the men upon their shoulders when carrying the shells. If any shavings etc have been allowed to remain in the burial ground, it has been from inadvertence.”*

\* *“Mrs Gwilt is also under error as to the cleansing of the bodies by mops and pailfuls of water, the Beadle only using the same for cleansing of the bone house. The Beadle has been compelled to preserve the clothes of the persons found drowned in order that they should be owned and delivered up. No other course is open to him.”*

In my view, this exchange emerges as something like a draw. The churchwardens' subtle undermining of Mrs Gwilt's character (“it is to be hoped”), combined with her family's decision to build over Cross Bones without permission, hint that a feud between the two sides was already well underway when she put pen to paper. If so, that history would account for a degree of rhetoric in her letter which may not always match the facts. On the other hand, St Saviour's often resorts to technicalities rather than substance in responding to her points. Mrs Gwilt was never suggesting the bodies awaiting burial at Cross Bones should have been left in people's homes instead, for example - merely that she wished they could be buried a bit more promptly once they'd arrived on her doorstep. Not was she urging St Saviour's to throw Charles Shooter's clothes away, but simply to find somewhere better they could be stored. <sup>(173)</sup>

St Saviour's was equally defiant in tackling the board's second complaint, this one from a Dr Lever:

*“Cholera has prevailed in this vicinity to a fearful extent. The Parochial Officers have been told of the danger incurred by their continuing to inter in the ground [but] still they will not discontinue, as they are afraid of losing their fees.*

*“Upwards of 12 months since, the late Mr Callaway and myself signed a requisition as professional men, begging the churchwardens that no more burials might be permitted. To this requisition were appended the names of nearly every respectable inhabitant whose house is near the [graveyard], but the parish officers turned a deaf ear.”<sup>(96)</sup>*

St Saviour’s replied that Cross Bones was “as well situate, as little offensive to health and public morals and as open as almost any ground in the Metropolis. From these facts, we are of the opinion that the burial grounds of this parish are not in a state to require special interference of the Board of Health.”

Edwin Chadwick, the same man we met at the 1841 enquiry into urban burial grounds, was now heading the Board of Health - and he didn’t agree with St Saviour’s complacent view. On September 14, 1849, less than a month after the parish had responded to Gwilt’s and Lever’s complaints, *The London Gazette*’s front page carried an official board announcement. Addressed to the St Saviour’s churchwardens as a kind of open letter, it began by reminding them of the board’s powers to inspect British burial grounds and demand action on any it found to be dangerous. The board’s own inspector had now surveyed Cross Bones for himself, it said and pronounced it a health hazard to anyone living nearby. Therefore, the board was ordering St Saviour’s to stop burying people there immediately and not to resume doing so without its express permission.<sup>(174)</sup>

You’d have thought that would be end of the matter, but still St Saviour’s fought on. It replied that closing Cross Bones “would entail a serious inconvenience and great additional expense to the poorest inhabitants of this parish”, arguing that the board’s verdict was based “chiefly if not wholly on the false and exaggerated statements contained in a letter of Mrs Gwilt”. When the board issued a legal summons against St Saviour’s for failing to obey its closure order, the parish consulted its own lawyers and concluded the board had exceeded its powers by ordering Cross Bones’ outright closure in the first place.<sup>(175)</sup>

Perhaps that’s why the board’s next ruling took a slightly different line. On October 16, it had *The London Gazette* carry another message to St Saviour’s, this one preceded by an even longer list of the board’s statutory powers. It then demanded that all the following changes must be made at Cross Bones before any further burials were considered:

- \* Entire surface (barring footpaths and any paved areas) to be covered with at least three inches depth of quicklime.
- \* Where this quicklime was disturbed for the purpose of digging a new grave, it must be replaced to a depth of three inches as soon as that grave was re-filled.
- \* All new graves on the site to be coated with at least three inches of quicklime at the bottom before the coffin goes in.
- \* One coffin per grave. No exceptions.

- \* All graves to be at least two feet six inches apart.
- \* All coffins to have at least five feet of dirt between the lid and surface ground
- \* All coffins placed in vaults, brick-lined graves or catacombs on-site to be lined with lead and soldered air-tight.
- \* If any bones or coffin parts should be unearthed, the earth disturbed must be replaced immediately and an extra three inches of quicklime deposited on that spot.
- \* No ground to be disturbed, or any new grave dug, on a spot where a burial's been made in the past ten years.

By this point in its long history, I doubt there was a single inch of Cross Bones where even half these conditions could be satisfied, so you could argue the list amounted to another order that the ground should simply be closed down. By going through the formality of setting out necessary changes in this way, I imagine the board was simply ensuring it hobbled any legal challenge St Saviour's may care to launch in future.

On October 22, 1849, St Saviour's vestry met again to hear the latest report from its Cross Bones committee. "The chairman reported that the Cross Bones ground had been cleaned up and a new path laid," the MoL says. "It was found that the old path had no bodies under it and 'would afford ample accommodation for the wants of the poorer inhabitants for a long time to come'." We know St Saviour's approached the Board of Health after this meeting, asking if it could use the area under the old path alone for new burials, but not what the board said in reply. One way or another, though, as the MoL confirms, burials certainly did continue at Cross Bones well into the 1850s and there's good reason to believe nothing much changed in how the site was run.

As evidence for this, we have a November 1852 letter to Spencer Walpole, Britain's Home Secretary, from a group of residents in Union Street, Borough High Street and Redcross Way. All those streets lined the walls of Cross Bones, so people living there had more opportunity than most to observe what went on at the site and every reason to fear its effect on their health. Here's what they told the Home Secretary:

*"The gravedigger is daily seen with a long steel-pointed iron rod, sticking the ground here and there, spearing the top coffins until some wood gives way, whereupon the whole of the contents, sometimes many [coffins] in that particular grave, are turned out and remain several days above ground to the scandal of all Christian men. When each of these exhumations have taken place, there have been seen in such human remains a number of skulls too numerous to mention, lying like half-devoured turnips about a sheepfold and cared for as little."* <sup>(96, 176)</sup>

The letter added that between ten and 13 people living at one of the underclass lodging houses in Redcross Way had died during a single month of the 1849 cholera outbreak and reminded Walpole that the Board of Health's closure order against Cross Bones had been allowed to go unenforced. "There has been no cessation in these scandalous outrages on the dead, nor the least abatement of the sickening and abominable

effluvium emanating from this enormous heap of putrescence,” it concludes. “We pray, Right Honourable Sir, and rely upon your kind interference to prevent the continuance of this great and most abominable nuisance to the safety of our families and the comfort of our homes.”

Walpole responded by commissioning his own inspection of Cross Bones, this one carried out by a Dr Sutherland. The report he submitted to Walpole did not make happy reading:

*“[Cross Bones] is evidently used for an inferior class of interments and can be considered only as a convenient place for getting rid of the dead. It bears no marks of ever having been set apart as a place of Christian Sepulchre. It is crowded with dead and many fragments of decayed bones, some even entire, are mixed up with the earth of the mounds over the graves.”*

Sutherland’s figures show that a total of 1,180 bodies were buried in Cross Bones’ total area of 2,089 square yards between 1845 and 1851 alone, with the cholera years of 1849 and 1850 bringing the highest loads. “If proper regulations had been adopted for this ground and 39 superficial feet allowed for each interment, which is the average required to protect the public health from injury, the whole area would have accommodated only 482 coffins, [and] it would have been full in somewhat less than three years,” Sutherland writes. His figures demonstrate that even if Cross Bones had been completely empty in 1845 – which it certainly wasn’t – it would have already been packed with more than twice the number of dead it could safely carry by the end of 1850.

Burials at the College Ground had been abandoned by the time Sutherland inspected Cross Bones, leaving St Saviour’s with just two parish grounds at its disposal: Cross Bones and the churchyard surrounding what’s now Southwark Cathedral. Between the two, these gave St Saviour’s a total burial area of just 3,583 square yards to serve a population of about 19,638. “The parish is a very unhealthy one and has an annual mortality of above 29 in the 1,000, [so] the annual deaths are 550,” Sutherland continues. “Were the two grounds now opened for the first time and were all the parochial dead buried in them, they would be entirely filled in about 18 months.”<sup>(177)</sup>

His conclusions were these:

- \* Burial ground provided in St Saviour’s parish was “entirely inadequate to the wants of the population”
- \* Both St Saviour’s remaining parish grounds had “long been completely overcharged with dead”.
- \* Further burials at either of these grounds would be “inconsistent with a due regard for the public health and public safety”.
- \* Burials at both Cross Bones and St Saviour’s churchyard “should be wholly discontinued”.

“This time the vestry was forced to act,” the MoL says. “On 29 March 1853, the burial board reported, that after looking at alternative locations for burial, including parish land at Sydenham, the best solution was to approach one of the cemetery companies. This led to the offer of a piece of ground of between six and seven acres in

the cemetery at Brookwood, near Woking, belonging to the London Necropolis Company.” Four month’s later, Lord Palmerston, Walpole’s replacement as Home Secretary, ordered that Cross Bones must close no later than September 21, 1853. He rejected St Saviour’s plea for a week’s stay of execution while the LNC deal was finalised, forcing the vestry to make interim arrangements with the Victoria Park Cemetery Company in Hackney instead. <sup>(178, 179)</sup>

St Saviour’s vestry minutes include a note made on October 24, 1853, confirming that Cross Bones was now closed for good. In a letter to *The Times* 30 years later, Lord Brabazon, a campaigner for urban parks, claimed the last Cross Bones burials of all were those of Sarah Fleming, aged 36, who’d lived at St Margaret’s Court in the Borough and a child named Sawday from Redcross Way itself. He dates these two final burials to October 31, 1853, but doesn’t explain how this can be made to square with the other information available.

By November 1854, St Saviour’s was ready to end its temporary arrangement with Victoria Park and switch to the ten acres it had leased at LNC’s Woking cemetery instead. The parish charged 14 shillings for each adult funeral it arranged through LNC and 10 shillings for every child’s funeral. This covered road transportation to LNC’s Waterloo depot, one-way train passage for the body to Woking, two third-class return tickets for the mourners, plus minister and gravedigger’s fees. St Saviour’s added an extra shilling to the price if burial in consecrated ground was required, plus two shillings for every additional mourner who wanted to go along. LNC’s own third-class fares at about this time were set at two shillings (single) for every corpse and two shillings and sixpence (return) for each mourner, so all the ancillary services would have left St Saviour’s little, if any, profit. Pauper funerals, of course, brought in no money at all and we have figures showing St Saviour’s paid for 89 of these at Brookwood in 1858 alone.

Left with an inner-city graveyard it could no longer use, St Saviour’s rented out Cross Bones to a Mr Stephens, who signed a 26½-year lease on the site in November 1854 at annual rent of £50. Stephens promptly sub-let the site to a local tradesman called Downs, who used it as a builder’s yard. A good deal of work would have been needed to get Cross Bones in shape for any commercial use like this, but when that work was done and who paid for it I don’t know.

In 1868, the Bishop of Winchester’s rights to the old Clink Liberty’s land were formally transferred to the Church of England’s Ecclesiastical Commissioners, who duly passed Cross Bones’ freehold on to St Saviour’s parish. Given full ownership of the site at last, the churchwardens there waited till Stephens’ lease completed its term in 1881, obtained the necessary Home Office development licences and offered Cross Bones as building land instead. This prompted an immediate protest from Lord Brabazon, who accused St Saviour’s of desecrating Cross Bones merely to maximise its financial return. He quickly sketched out the site’s history in a November 1883 letter to *The Times* and then issued this call for action:

*“The ground is now being offered to the public, on lease, as an ‘eligible building site’. It is with a view to save this ground from such desecration and to retain it as an open space for the use and enjoyment of the people, that I now address you.*

*“The trustees have under their consideration an application from a builder to acquire this ground for building purposes at a rental of £200 and at a meeting of the trustees held on [November 7], it was stated that, unless somebody came forward to purchase this space as a public*

*garden, so that the dead might yet remain in peace, the trustees would be forced to let it for building purposes.*

*“The person making the offer has obtained the sanction of the Home Office, providing that he undertakes to excavate the ground to the level of the virgin soil and to remove all human remains. This he is apparently willing to do, but how it is likely to be done may be inferred from what happened in a similar case, where cartloads of earth mixed with human remains were seen leaving the ground for sale as garden soil.*

*“It is to be hoped the public will take this matter up and raise a sum – say, £6,000 – for [the site’s] purchase to be maintained as an open space for the perpetual use and enjoyment of the people. This neighbourhood abounds in narrow courts and alleys, filled with the poor of both sexes, far removed from any open space.”<sup>(170)</sup>*

Brabazon followed up this letter with a second one to *The Times* a few weeks later, saying St Saviour’s was keen to maximise its income from Cross Bones now only because a recent change in legislation had abolished the church-rate payments it previously received. The builder mentioned in his first letter, he added, was already drilling exploratory holes at Cross Bones to assess the amount of work need to clear the site of human remains and hence decide what final price he was prepared to offer. His plan was to erect “a block of industrial dwellings” on the site.<sup>(180)</sup>

In the end, it was not the prospect of this extra work which saved Cross Bones from the 1883 development deal, but Parliament’s passing of 1884’s Disused Burial Grounds Act, which made it illegal to build anything but a place of worship on any old burial ground. That legislation has been considerably weakened since, so it can’t help Cross Bones now, but in the aftermath of Brabazon’s letter it was enough to kibosh the whole deal. “The only thing that you could do with a piece of ground that had previously been used as a graveyard was build a church on it,” Dark told me. “And you don’t need a church there.”

Returning to the option of short-term leases on the site, St Saviour’s let it out to Charles Hart, a showman, who set up a full steam-driven fairground at Cross Bones in 1892. His nightly attractions there included shooting ranges, steam roundabouts and a notoriously nerve-wracking new ride called the Razzle Dazzle. But residents nearby complained of the noise and Hart’s fairground was closed down as a nuisance.

By 1929, the area’s collective memory had faded enough for developers to assume any human remains at Cross Bones must have been removed long ago and another team of constructors excavating there were surprised to find themselves turning up human skulls. “A number of human remains was unearthed, skulls and limb bones predominating,” the Borough’s Medical Officer Horace Wilson wrote in his annual report. “They were found six feet below the surface and descended to a depth of ten feet. These bones were of considerable antiquity.”

Wilson goes on to say that these particular bones were reburied at the LNC’s ground in Brookwood, but that’s no guarantee that the construction gang at Cross Bones was equally meticulous throughout the whole project. I wonder if their 1929 work went on to build the warehouse foundations the MoL found lined with bones in its own dig 64 years later?<sup>(97)</sup>



## Chapter 20: What happens next?

And that, I think, is just about that. The only remaining question is what will happen to Cross Bones next and whether its unique role among London's historic burial grounds will be honoured by future developers on the site.

One thing we can say for sure is that there's going to be a building put up there one day. London's city-state economy has weathered the austerity of the past five years far better than the rest of Britain and that's particularly true of the financial firms now colonising Southwark from their base across the river. A 2004 study showed that the new Jubilee Line extension, completed at the turn of the Millennium, increased the value of Southwark real estate by a total of about £800m and the Thameslink extension programme now underway can only boost it further.

At the end of October 2013, Southwark Council sold a dilapidated six-bedroom block on Park Street, about 150 yards from Cross Bones, for an astonishing £2.96m. "The building needs extensive repair and refurbishment, but its proximity to the Shard and fashionable Bankside area of the capital puts it in a prime part of a borough where house prices have risen by almost 10% over the past year," *The Guardian's* October 28 issue reported.

The £450m Shard tower, opened just streets away from Cross Bones in February this year, makes the area equally irresistible to office developers. Already, the commercial property agent Deloitte has coined the name Landmark Court for Cross Bones and is advertising its availability online as "a rare opportunity to acquire a largely-cleared landmark development site [...] in an area undergoing significant enhancement". It hopes to hear from anyone wishing, "to comprehensively develop the site".<sup>(181)</sup>

Anyone planning to build at Cross Bones would have to remove all the site's human remains first and see to it they got a proper burial elsewhere. John Harris of TCS Exhumations, who handled the removal and reburial on Canvey Island of 15,000 bodies at Southwark's nearby Globe Academy site in 2008, discussed this process with the *Financial Times* four years later. "Clearing bodies is awkward," he said. "Licences are needed from the Home Office and, in some cases, ecclesiastical authorities. Sometimes, especially when the property market is suppressed, the cost of exhumation can mean a site becomes uneconomic to develop". But my guess is that the potential profits from building at Cross Bones already look big enough to make the added cost of exhumation worth bearing – and even if that's not true now, London's ever-rising property prices will take care of the issue soon enough.<sup>(182)</sup>

Various local politicians have pledged their support for Cross Bones' unique character, with London mayor Boris Johnson promising no further development work will be allowed there till at least 2015. When Val Shawcross, chairwoman of the London Assembly's transport committee, asked Johnson about the prospect of a memorial garden at Cross Bones, he replied: "I am aware of this issue and recognise the cultural and historic importance of the Cross Bones Burial Ground. The deputy mayor for transport is discussing this issue with Transport for London." That's all impeccably meaningless stuff, but we can draw a little more comfort from Southwark Council's attitude.

In 2002, the council refused planning permission for a proposed office development on the site of Cross Bones, citing community concern about the spot's sensitive history. TfL managed to get that decision over-turned with a Department of Environment appeal, but in the end the developers thought better of it and allowed their

planning permission to lapse without a sod being turned. Most likely, it was a combination of the exhumation costs mentioned above plus the threat of bad publicity that put them off – but there’s no guarantee the site will be so lucky next time. In 2008, Southwark Council added the development of a memorial garden at Cross Bones to its own list of possible projects for the area, but chose not to label it a priority. That year, the council’s Community Projects Bank voted to allocate £100,000 to eventually creating a Cross Bones memorial garden, but whether that money remains on the table today is a different matter. “I’d like to know that myself,” Constable said when I asked him.

Another possibility is that any planning permission Southwark Council does eventually grant on the site comes with a quid pro quo that the developers include a worthwhile memorial garden in their plans. This sort of scheme relies on what Britain’s councils call “Section 106 money”, a portion of the developer’s budget for the site allocated to council-approved community projects, such as improvements to a local park or school. “We would fight very strongly for that,” Constable told me. “If there was a development on the rest of the Cross Bones site, then the Section 106 money could be put into the making of the garden. Have a development on Southwark Street, which is a commercial street ideal for development, but a park tucked away down Redcross Way which is accessible to all the people who work there – if they want to have their lunch there, things like that.”

That’s what Patricia Dark hopes can eventually be done with Cross Bones too. “I’d like to see it turned into a garden,” she told me. “Mint Street Park isn’t very big and it would be nice to have something with some trees, some flowers, a couple of benches. Some place that says, ‘We understand this is City South with the hustle and bustle of modern business life, but here’s a place you can just sit and contemplate things. In particular, it would be nice if there was a place to contemplate all those people who just get ground under the wheels of history.’”

This raises the question of how much of Cross Bones’ messy, outlaw history could be acknowledged in any memorial garden built by what amounts to a corporate sponsor. The monument to Britain’s sex workers which many suggest including would be a touching tribute both to the murdered women named on the site’s gates today and to their many Southwark sisters of the past, but a hard pill to swallow for corporate PRs. “If you’re a Jew, a fire officer, a woman in the war, a dogs’ home, you rightfully have a tree, a plaque, a remembrance day,” campaigner Chris Student said at the gates of Cross Bones in 2012. “But if you’re in the sex industry, you have nothing. Why? Because it’s too ‘dirty’ and ‘disgusting’. But prostitutes have always been a part of society whether society likes it or not.”<sup>(42, 183)</sup>

The gates at Cross Bones have played an important part in acknowledging uncomfortable truths like that in the past decade and that’s why Constable would like to see both a tombstone and a plaque honouring the site’s outcast, pauper past incorporated into any memorial garden’s design. Too determined an attempt to erase Cross Bones’ awkward history, he believes, would risk turning people’s affection for the site into something more like rage. “If they stripped the gates, something would come back,” he told me. “And it might not be as gentle. It’s more likely that, if they really did that, people would start putting more scary images on the gates. They do appear sometimes, but they’re always drawn into the context of something much more compassionate and embracing and unifying. Likewise, if they sealed off the garden, I think a lot more people would be minded to try and push down hoardings or climb over the wall.

“I’ve always argued that what we’re doing offers a channel for people to express their love and care for the graveyard. And that, I suppose, is where our work at Cross

Bones is connected to a much bigger agenda – and that is the agenda of how we value life itself.”

*If you'd like to help protect Cross Bones and add to the pressure for a Garden of Remembrance there, please sign the Friends of Cross Bones petition: <http://www.crossbones.org.uk/#/petition-contact/4530753744>.*

*Many thanks to John Constable, Katy Nicholls, Jennifer Cooper and Andy Hulme for their tireless work preserving and beautifying Cross Bones – and also for their help with this piece. Thanks also to Patricia Dark of Southwark's Local History Library and all my other interviewees.*

## Appendix I: The Red Gates on YouTube

Cross Bones has spawned a host of short amateur films on YouTube. These are a few of the most popular.

**Crossbones – A Secret History of Southwark, by DrWot (July 2008)**

**Views to date:** 16,884. Includes interviews with Dr Stephen Humphrey of Southwark Local Studies and Joyce Newman, whose mother lived in Redcross Way in 1899/1900.

**The People of the Crossbones Graveyard, by Michael Travis (Feb 2010)**

**Views to date:** 8,263. At ten minutes running time, this is the longest and best of the various Cross Bones films I've discovered.

**The Red Gates, by LuceProctor (Oct 2009).**

**Views to date:** 6,925. Includes interviews with James Manning of the Sex Workers' Union and Vee, one of the working girls who likes to visit Cross Bones.

**Where the Prostitutes were Buried in London, by JandBFrench (August 2006)**

**Views to date:** 5,975. Includes footage of John Crow speaking at the Cross Bones gates. How bare they look compared to today!

**Crossbones Graveyard, by Jamie Gregory (June 2007)**

**Views to date:** 3,275. When I first watched this video, a pop-up ad appeared under its footage of the Cross Bones plaque: "Enjoy exclusive offers at Liberty". Sadly, this turned out to be not the Bishop's Liberty of the Clink, but the fancy store in central London.

*All viewing figures represent a snapshot taken in September 2013.*

## Appendix II: Songs of the Goose

### **The Winchester Geese, by Stuart Forester (2010).**

“Say a prayer for all your sins / Cross your bones and take to wing / A pauper’s grave is all that waits / And you’ll be turned from Heaven’s gates.” I discovered this acclaimed Hull folksinger’s mournful account of the tale on a YouTube video filmed in Southwark’s Bermondsey Square. That’s since vanished, but his studio version’s much better anyway. *Available on: Pennies for Gold (self-released, 2010).*

**Winchester Geese, by The Unbending Trees (2010).** Hungary’s answer to Low pare it right down to a slow, whispered meditation of harp and vocals alone here. “No-one knows about them / No-one cares about them / The Winchester Geese / Men could make them fly by / Men could make fall down / Just as they please.” Filmed in a studio rehearsal, but not yet released on disc. *Available on: YouTube.*

### **A Rose for a Winchester Goose, by John Crow (2011).**

John Constable’s shamanic alter ego recorded this slow, gentle ballad with acoustic guitar, harmonica and female backing vocals. It tells the story of a sea captain called Tom Bones, who leaves his true love working in a Bankside brothel while he goes off to roam the oceans. You’ll have to listen to the song to find out what happens next, but be warned that things don’t end happily for either of them. *Available on: Reverbnation.*

### **Crossbones Graveyard, by Pillarcat (2011).**

Driving bass-led instrumental from the full band. Very much a showcase for the rhythm section, with background colouring added by some subtle horns and flashes of Hawkwind’s wibbling synth. Result is both catchy and enjoyable. *Available on: Weave (Savage Acoustic, 2011).*

### **Lullaby and Leave This City, by Gaggle (2012).**

The all-female choir performed both these songs at the Cross Bones gates during the June 2012 ceremony there. The first was chosen for its chorus (“Will you take good care of me?”) and the second because, as the choir’s Katie Wilkinson put it, “it’s about having nowhere else to go”. In their album versions, both songs feature shrill and sometimes jarring electronic music, set against moments of childlike, delicate beauty. *Available on: From The Mouth of the Cave (Transgressive, 2012).*

**Winchester Geese, by Cherry Choke (2013).** Garagey Leicester psych-rock outfit tear it up onstage with this number from their *In The Arms of Venus* LP. Highlights include the powerhouse drums and a couple of admirably stinging guitar solos. I caught a reference to “resurrection men” in one verse, but beyond that the lyrics are a mystery to me. *Available on: YouTube and (as a free download) at last.fm.*

## Appendix III: Who cared about consecrated ground?

One question no-one can quite answer about Cross Bones is why St Saviour's vestry would have refused to consecrate one of its official parish burial grounds. Even if we assume St Saviour's preferred not to inter Bankside's whores on consecrated ground, it seems a little rough to consign the blameless paupers buried there to the same treatment.

The MoL's report confirms that Cross Bones seems to have remained unconsecrated and offers a possible explanation. "This is probably due to the land being held on a lease from the Bishop of Winchester," the report says. "It was customary to consecrate only freehold land."

St Saviour's did consecrate the local workhouse's leased burial ground, but Southwark historian Patricia Dark confirmed this practice would have been the exception rather than the rule. "It was very unusual, because you have a fundamental tension between the fact that it's consecrated and the fact that it will revert to someone else," she told me. "With Cross Bones, it could be that they just decided, 'Well, this is going to be used as a graveyard and nothing but a graveyard, so it's consecrated in all but name.'" <sup>(184)</sup>

Dark thought it was also possible that Cross Bones had been consecrated once, long before St Saviour's Parish took an interest in the site, perhaps by the Bishop of Winchester himself when he still had charge of the surrounding Liberty. If so, no record of this ceremony has survived till our era, but that's not to say St Saviour's wasn't aware of it at the time.

A third possibility is that St Saviour's first leased Cross Bones during one of the periodic spikes in Southwark's death rate and was simply too busy shovelling fresh corpses into the ground to worry about niceties like consecration. This is lent some support by sources claiming St Saviour's first took out the Cross Bones lease in 1665, the year of the Great Plague. In circumstance like that, who could blame the churchwardens for choosing to believe the Bishop must have consecrated his Liberty's burial ground at some point or another and moving on to deal with the emergency at hand?

"It's one of those things that nobody quite knows, so everyone's being a little bit cagey on it," Dark told me. "But I do find it a little bit weird that the parish would be burying people on ground they knew for certain wasn't consecrated."

It's also worth asking whether the people who buried their loved ones at Cross Bones cared whether it was consecrated ground or not. The Reformation of the 1530s, which transformed England into a Protestant country, had erased the Catholic concept of Limbo and any notion that your place of burial influenced your soul's destination. But how far that doctrinal change filtered through to the hearts of Southwark's common folk is another matter.

"Popular or uneducated perceptions were in many respects out of line with official teachings," Reading University's Professor Ralph Houlbrooke told me. "The post-Reformation Protestant church insisted that where a body was buried had no influence whatsoever on the fate of the soul. But many of the poor and less well-educated may well have thought it unlucky to be buried in unconsecrated ground." <sup>(185)</sup>

Thomas Hardy has a heartbreaking scene in his 1891 novel *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, showing just how much pain this issue could cause. When Tess's baby dies before it can be baptised, the local vicar refuses it a churchyard burial for that reason alone. But Tess is so desperate to avoid burying the infant on unconsecrated ground that she refuses to take no for answer. "The baby was carried in a small deal box, under an ancient woman's shawl, to the churchyard that night and buried by lantern-light, at the cost of a shilling and a pint of beer to the sexton," Hardy writes. "Tess bravely made a little cross of two laths and a piece of string and having bound it with flowers, she stuck it up at the head of the grave one evening when she could enter the churchyard without being seen." <sup>(186)</sup>

Hardy sets the novel in the 1870s, some 350 years after the Reformation, but evidently believed a young mother like Tess was still likely to act in this desperate way. It would have been harder to achieve a secret nocturnal burial in the crowded surroundings of St Saviour's own churchyard, but certainly not impossible. How many dead babies made their way there in a deal box by moonlight, I wonder?

Whatever their theological fears about a burial at Cross Bones, however, most of the

families facing that prospect would have other worries higher on their list. “It is likely their overwhelming priority was the cost of burial,” Professor Jeremy Boulton of Newcastle University told me. “A pauper burial, wherever it took place, was done at parish expense. Those interred had to accept a lower quality interment in exchange for not paying burial fees.”<sup>(187)</sup>

The short answer to Cross Bones’ unconsecrated status, then, seems to be that no-one in authority cared enough about the people buried there to bother changing it. The families themselves had no clout to protest and would in any case have feared that consecrating the site might lead to higher fees. “Burial location was determined far more by social status than by religious or spiritual concerns,” Boulton reminded me.<sup>(188)</sup>

## Appendix IV: Those 12th Century brothel rules in full

- 1) No brothel-keeper to prevent his whores entering or leaving the premises at will. Fine: 3 shillings and 4 pence.
- 2) All brothel-keepers to send their whores away from the date of these rules' proclamation until next Whitsuntide. Fine: 100 shillings.
- 3) No brothel-keeper to open for business on holy days. Fine: 50 shillings.
- 4) Bailiff to ensure all whores are expelled from the Liberty on holy days. Fine: £10. No brothel-keeper shall attempt to hinder this process. Fine: 40 shillings.
- 5) Quarterly searches of every brothel must be carried out to ensure no woman is imprisoned there against her will. If any such woman is found, Bishop's officers must escort her safely out of the Liberty.
- 6) No brothel-keeper to lend any of his whores more than 6 shillings and 8 pence. Sums above that to be considered void by the Bishop's courts.
- 7) No disputes involving over 40 shillings to be taken to the Bishop's court. These must go to the King's court instead. Fine: £10.
- 8) No brothel-keeper to employ general staff beyond his wife, one washerwoman and one ostler.
- 9) All whores to wear some agreed garment indicating their profession. Each whore to pay brothel-keeper 14 pence a week for her chamber on the premises.
- 10) No brothel-keeper to imprison any customer on his premises for refusing to pay. Defaulters must be taken to the Bishop's court instead. Fine: 20 shillings.
- 11) No brothel-keeper to knowingly accept a nun or another man's wife as one of his whores without permission from the Bishop's officials. Fine: 12 pence.
- 12) All brothel-keepers must register new whores arriving on their premises with the Bishop's officials. Penalty for the brothel-keeper: 40 shillings fine. Penalty for the whore: 20 shillings fine plus a session in the cucking stool and expulsion from the Liberty.
- 13) All brothel-keepers to safely return any customers' property left with them for safekeeping. Fine: 20 shillings.
- 14) No whore to entice any man into the brothel by pulling on his coat or any other item of clothing. Fine: 20 shillings.
- 15) No brothel-keeper's wife to entice any man into the house against his will. Fine: 40 shillings.
- 16) Constables to search every brothel once a week for any infringements. Fine for impeding this search: 100 shillings.
- 17) No whore to be prevented from boarding wherever she wishes. Fine: 20 shillings.
- 18) No whore to remain in the Liberty on holy days between 8:00am and 11:00am, or between 1:00pm and 5:00pm.



- 19) No whore to keep a lover of her own “against the use and custom of the manor”. Penalty: Three weeks in prison, plus 6 shillings and 8 pence fine, plus a session in the cucking stool and expulsion from the Liberty.
- 20) No whore to engage in spinning or carding. No whore to throw stones at passers by or pull faces at them for refusing to come in. Fine: 3 shillings and 4 pence.
- 21) No chore to chide with any man or make a fray. Fine: Three days in prison plus a fine of 6 shillings and 8 pence.
- 22) No brothel-keeper to open for business on holy days between matins and noon or between 2:00pm and 6:00pm.
- 23) No whore to be found in the Liberty between sunset and dawn on any day when the King’s Parliament or Council is sitting at Westminster. Fine: 6 shillings and 8 pence.
- 24) Any constable or bailiff aware of a breach in these rules but failing to report it to the Bishop’s court can be imprisoned for as long as the court sees fit.
- 25) No brothel-keeper to employ an ostler on a contract of longer than six months.
- 26) No constable or bailiff to accept bail personally from his prisoners. Bail must be administered by the Bishop’s court. Fine: 6 shillings and 8 pence.
- 27) Each whore’s final customer of the day must be allowed to stay overnight. Fine: 6 shillings and 8 pence.
- 28) No brothel-keeper to operate a boat in any way contrary to the custom of the manor. Fine: 6 shillings and 8 pence.
- 29) Any whore keeping her own brothel in the Liberty must obey these rules. Fine: 20 shillings.
- 30) No brothel-keeper to accept any whore he knows is pregnant. No whore to work while pregnant. Fine: 20 shillings (for the brothel-keeper); 6 shillings and 8 pence (for the whore).
- 31) No bailiff to allow an offender bail without the court’s authorisation. Fine: 100 shillings.
- 32) No brothel-keeper to let any whore work on his premises if he knows she has “the burning sickness” (probably gonorrhoea). Fine: 20 shillings.
- 33) No bailiff or constable to be paid more than 4 pence for an arrest, except in exceptionally serious cases involving a large sum.
- 34) No man in the Liberty to cause an assault by breaching these rules. Fine: 3 shillings and 4 pence.
- 35) No whore to wear an apron. Fine: “After the custom of the manor”.
- 36) No brothel-keeper to sell food or drink from the same premises. Fine is set at the discretion of the steward and the constables.
- 37) No whore or brothel-keeper to engage in coin-clipping.
- 38) Unclear. Thought to contain a measure against foreign pimps.

39) No brothel-keeper to allow cursing or blasphemy on his premises, as this often led to trouble.

## Appendix V: Bishop jails girl for refusing whoredom

Elizabeth Butler was visiting a friend's London house in 1473 when she met Thomas Boyd for the first time.

Boyd offered her a job as a domestic servant at what he said was a Bankside inn, promising good pay and excellent working conditions. She accepted and went with him to Bankside, where she quickly realised that the building was actually a brothel and Boyd was its manager. Far from the light housekeeping duties his original offer had implied, Boyd's real plan was for Butler to join the building's stable of whores. "He would have compelled me to do such things and service as other his servants done there," she later testified.

When Butler refused to play ball, Boyd claimed she owed him rent and took her to the Bishop of Winchester's court demanding a cash sum so large he knew she could never hope to pay it. The court found Butler guilty and jailed her when she admitted she had no money. That was exactly what Boyd had hoped would happen. He'd be happy to get Butler out of jail by cancelling her debt, he said - but only if she did what he wanted on Bankside. Butler was stubborn and still she refused.

After three weeks in the Bishop's Clink prison, she somehow managed to get a petition to the Bishop of Durham, pleading with him to get her case heard in the higher court of Chancery. She got as far as a hearing before London's City Chamberlain, but frustratingly that's where the records peter out.

We have a couple of other fragments of court cases from the 15<sup>th</sup> Century which also shed a little light on crime and punishment in the stews.

In April 1439, for example, a known bawd named Margaret Hathewyck was charged with procuring a young girl called Isabel Lane for a group of men from the Lombardy region of what's now Italy. "Isabel was deflowered against her will for money paid to the said Margaret," the City Chamberlain's court rolls say. After the Lombards had finished with Lane, Hathewycke delivered her to a Bankside brothel "for immoral purposes with a certain gentlemen on four occasions against her will". Hathewyck's name appears at about this time among the list of prisoners sent to the Clink, where she seems to have served a 20-year sentence.

Another Bankside steward got what was coming to him in 1494 – and for a very similar offence to Boyd's crime above. "Upon the second day of July, was set upon the pillory a bawd of the stews named Thomas Toogood," *Fabyan's Great Chronicle* reports. "The which before the mayor was proved guilty that he enticed two women dwelling at Queenhythe to become his servants and to have men in common within his house."

## Appendix VI: The ruling families of Bankside

Court records from the 16<sup>th</sup> Century give us an intriguing glimpse of how the Bankside brothels were then run. Stewholders were fined pretty regularly for one offence or another and the fact that so many of the family names involved pop up again and again shows the web of connections between them.

The list below shows the 18 legal Bankside brothels trading in 1500. Each stood in its own large grounds, stretching back as far as Maiden Lane on their southern boundaries. Burford estimates that they probably employed about 350 girls between them, or roughly a third of the 1,000-plus whores he believes were working Southwark at this time. The rest relied on the many illegal Borough whorehouses found in the High Street and beyond.<sup>(189)</sup>

Between them, the 18 licensed brothels formed an unbroken line along the river all the way from London Bridge to what's now Tate Modern and that's the east-west order I've given them here.<sup>(190)</sup>

**The Castle:** One of the two largest properties on Bankside (the other being The Unicorn). John Sandes' name is found linked to both establishments, suggesting he may well have been the stewholders' leader. He was also a member of the City's Guild of Coopers.

**The Gun:** One of the six brothels never re-licensed after the 1505 closures. The others were The Swan, The Bull's Head, The Rose, The Bell and The Cardinal's Hat.

**The Antelope:** Managers included both David Arnold and John Gray, who's linked at other times to The Castle and The Elephant.

**The Swan:** Another of the six brothels refused a new licence after the 1505 closures (see The Gun, above). Not to be confused with the Swan Theatre in nearby Paris Gardens, which opened in 1595.

**The Bull's Head:** Like the other five brothels refused a new licence, The Bull's Head probably re-opened anyway. From that point on, they had to operate outside the law, with all the risk that implies.

**The Hart:** Run by Margery Curson, who was fined £1 in 1500 for "living without a husband". It was an offence for a single woman to run a stewhouse, but Margery went right on and did it anyway. She rented The Hart from the churchwardens of St Margaret's Parish.

**The Elephant:** Managed at various times by Edward Wharton and Robert à Murray, whose name is also found linked to The Barge and The Antelope. Robert's brother David was also involved in running the Bankside stews.

**The Lion:** At various times, both Richard Gardiner and Joan Gardiner are mentioned as running The Lion. On another occasion, Joan Gardiner's said to be managing The Hart's Horn.

**The Hart's Horn:** Represented at a 1505 hearing by Margaret Toogood. She's thought to be either the widow or the daughter of the Thomas Toogood pilloried for enticing women into prostitution in 1494.

**The Bear:** Re-opened for legal trade on August 29, 1506, under the management of Eleanor Kent.

**The Rose:** This is the brothel once owned by London Mayor William Walworth. By 1552, it was owned by Henry Polsted, who leased it to a manager called John Davison, who also ran The Unicorn at that time.<sup>(191)</sup>

**The Barge:** Re-opened for legal trade in June 1506, with Robert à Murray as its manager.

**The Bell:** Nothing known.

**The Unicorn:** The second of Bankside's two biggest establishments and again managed by John Sandes. See The Castle.

**The Boar's Head:** Run by first Agnes Gardiner and then by Annian Gardiner. Both were presumably related to the Gardiners who ran The Lion and The Hart's Horn. A manager called William Aldersley spoke for The Boar's Head at a 1505 hearing.

**The Cross Keys:** Managed in 1505 by Anna Ratclyffe.

**The Fleur de Lys:** Managed in 1505 by Joan Freeman and in 1664 by Robert Younger.

**The Cardinal's Hat:** Mentioned by Shakespeare in *Henry VI pt 1*. Gloucester uses this infamous brothel's name to taunt the Bishop of Winchester in Act I, Scene III. See main article for details.

## Appendix VII: A short history of the Clink

“The clink” has been a British slang term for any prison ever since the early 16<sup>th</sup> Century and is still widely used in that sense on both sides of the Atlantic today. In *The Convict*, for example, a US episode of *The Office* first aired in November 2006, a character called Martin Nash says: “I got involved in some insider trading, so I spent a little time in the clink”. It’s the Bishop of Winchester’s notorious Southwark prison which gave us this long-standing term.

The Bishop would have had some sort of prison at his disposal ever since about 860AD, but at that time it was probably just a single cell in a priests’ college. When he took over responsibility for policing the Liberty surrounding Southwark palace in the 12<sup>th</sup> Century, naturally a bigger prison was required. He built the first version of the Clink on Maiden Lane, opposite what’s now Sumner Street. It looked like a medieval castle’s gatehouse – there’s a Gatehouse Street on the site to this day – with circular towers at each corner and battlements topping the walls. Very soon, the Clink gained a reputation for utter brutality.

“Unspeakable treatment became commonplace,” says Jennifer Jones’ Southwark history guide. “Entirely at the mercy of their keepers, prisoners were obliged to beg or prostitute themselves in order to provide the income necessary to improve their conditions by bribing the jailers.”

In 1352, the law changed, allowing debtors to be imprisoned and that increased the Clink’s population a great deal, giving the staff even greater opportunity for corruption. A century later, when Bishop Henry Beaufort died, he left £400 in his will to be distributed to inmates at the Clink and other local prisons. This would have been worth perhaps £1m in today’s money and Beaufort hoped the prisoners would use it to alleviate their misery.

Our first written record of this prison being called the Clink dates to 1503. Fifty years later, the Catholic Queen Mary I began imprisoning Protestant dissidents there and her successor, the Protestant Elizabeth I, did the same for Catholic heretics. Elizabeth jailed a lot of Protestant puritans in the Clink as well, where many of them starved. Henry Barrowe and John Greenwood, both of whom served time in the Clink before being hanged at Tyburn in 1593, were founders of the puritans’ Independent Church, whose congregation supplied many of the pilgrims who sailed to America on the Mayflower’s 1620 voyage. Barrowe had originally come to the Clink only to visit Greenwood, but when the keepers realised who he was, they refused to let him out again.

The Clink was still known as a fearful place where prisoners were left to rot. Its main function for the next 100 years was to jail offenders from the nearby brothels, bearpits, theatres and taverns. By 1745, the building was in such terrible disrepair that its inmates had to be moved to a new site near Borough Market. The prison’s name was transferred to its new premises too, which much later led to that whole street being named Clink Street. In 1780, the Gordon Riots burnt out the Clink and it never opened as a jail again. There’s a prison museum on its site in Clink Street today, where it pulls in thousands of tourists.

In 2002, the legendary graffiti artist Banksy painted this *Chequebook Vandalism* piece on the Clink’s outside wall. Southwark Council promptly painted over it and must be kicking themselves for doing so today. A Banksy mural removed from a wall in Wood Green, North London, fetched over £750,000 at auction in June 2013.

## Appendix VIII: 'A light, lewd fashion'

Puritan commentators of the 16<sup>th</sup> century were quick to condemn the slightly more revealing fashions middle-class women were then beginning to adopt. One way of doing this was to satirise such women by comparing their dress to that of a Bankside whore. In 1540, for example, the anti-papist poet Charles Bansley wrote: "For a Stewed strumpet cannot so soon / Set up a lewd light fashion / But every wanton jilt will like it well / And catch it up anon".

*The Anatomy of Melancholy's* Robert Burton (1577-1640), noted that the real working girls of his day went about with "their necks open almost to the kidneys". That was no more than necessary advertising in their case, but respectable women had no reason to go to such extremes. In practice, the most skin a nice girl ever flashed at this time was probably the saucy glimpse of collarbone seen in [this](#) 1546 portrait of the teenager who would become Elizabeth I.

That didn't stop the Kentish doctor John Hall attacking such women in his 1565 volume *The Court of Virtue*. Described as "a puritanical parody" of the cheerfully filthy ballads found in the 1558 best-seller *The Court of Venus*, Hall's work includes this verse: "The women their breasts did show and lay out / As well was it [seen] whose duges were stout / Which usance at first came up from the Stewes / Which men's wives and daughters after did use."

Hall's contemporary readers would have recognised his description as a mixture of parody and propaganda, so we must be careful to take it with a pinch of salt too. I asked Susan North, curator of fashion at London's Victoria & Albert Museum, to put this verse in some sort of context. She thought it much more likely that the wives and daughters Hall mentions were trying to copy not the Bankside stews, but the aristocracy. Again, the Princess Elizabeth portrait mentioned above gives us our best idea of what this meant in practice – and even that look was pretty risky outside England's blue-blooded elite.

"This was perfectly acceptable within the aristocracy and the world of the court," North told me of Elizabeth's 1546 décolletage. "But it's very difficult to determine if any middle-class women did actually dress this way. If they did, it's highly unlikely they were imitating prostitutes. It's more probable that they were attempting to copy the revealing head-dresses and necklines of women's court dress. But it reinforced the claims of misogynistic moralists to accuse them of dressing like strumpets." <sup>(192)</sup>

## Appendix IX: How to steal a theatre

“The Chamberlain’s Men were in trouble and the only way out was to get in a bit deeper.”

That’s James Shapiro, writing in his award-winning book *1599*. The theatrical company in question had Shakespeare as its resident writer, but that didn’t save them from the crisis that hit as the 16<sup>th</sup> Century drew to a close.

The company’s six shareholders were Richard Burbage, John Heminges, Will Kemp, Augustine Phillips, Thomas Pope and Shakespeare himself. All worked on its plays in one way or another. Among the actors represented, Burbage was recognised as the leading tragic actor of his age and Kemp as its finest clown.

Shakespeare at this point was both writing for the company and acting in some smaller roles. When the 1599 crisis arose, he’d already written 20 of his 38 plays, including all eight plays of the histories cycle plus *Romeo & Juliet*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and *As You Like It*. You’d think an output like that would ensure his company a home for life, but now their Shoreditch base had locked its doors against them and they were reduced to ad hoc touring instead.

Burbage’s father James had built The Theatre on a patch of Shoreditch land leased from a man called Giles Allen and given his son’s company the residency there in 1594. The building’s design had been inspired by London’s large inns, placing the actors in a central open courtyard while spectators watched from covered galleries on all four sides. The English weather meant staging plays there in winter was almost impossible.

James Burbage’s solution was to secure some land at Blackfriars and begin building an indoor theatre there, which he knew would be able to work all year round. There was some urgency to this, because Burbage knew The Theatre’s lease was close to expiring and so far the Puritan Allen had refused to renew it.

Blackfriars, unlike Shoreditch, was inside London’s city wall and this was a much more refined neighbourhood than any where a theatre had yet been built. Burbage hoped to turn this into a positive by pulling in a richer audience than he’d had available at Shoreditch, but in fact it proved to be the project’s undoing.

He’d already sunk £600 into building the new theatre - a sum which would be worth over £1½m today - when Blackfriars residents blocked its licence. They were a rich, well-connected bunch and none of them wanted the noisy, drunken riff-raff a theatre was like to attract coming anywhere near their homes.

Soon after this blow, James Burbage died, still without managing to renegotiate The Theatre’s lease. Richard had no more luck with these negotiations than his father had done and now faced the additional problem that all the family’s cash was tied up in the stalled Blackfriars project. Their lease on The Theatre duly expired and the Lord Chamberlain’s Men found themselves homeless. Richard Burbage heard that Allen planned to demolish The Theatre and reuse its timbers for a less sinful building - and that’s when he had an idea.

He gathered the other five LCM shareholders together and said he and his brother Cuthbert would supply £700 worth of the materials needed to build the company a new theatre if each of the others would agree to cover 10% of the construction costs, plus the expense of running the new place.

This would be the first theatre designed, owned and run by its own actors and writers. Shakespeare and the rest agreed to borrow the money they’d need for their own stakes and told Burbage to go ahead. By December 1598, he had everyone on board and, a few weeks later, they’d rented the Bankside site where the Globe would stand.

Burbage’s plan for obtaining the wood was simply to dismantle The Theatre and ship it across the Thames to the new site. His father had inserted a clause in the Shoreditch lease saying that all the materials he put into building The Theatre would remain his property for as long as the lease ran. But now that lease had expired, leaving Allen with the perfectly reasonable assumption that the building, like the land it stood on, now belonged to him.

Sorting this issue out in court would have taken months and eaten up any possible benefits in legal fees, so Burbage decided on direct action instead. On December 28, 1598, when he knew



Allen was away celebrating Christmas at his Essex estate, Burbage and rest gathered with a handful of carpenters and stagehands from the LCM crew. Heading the operation, they had a master builder called Peter Street.

They armed themselves with a load of real swords, daggers and axes borrowed from The Curtain's prop department and marched to The Theatre's site on what's now Broadway Market.

"When the armed group arrived at the playhouse, they set to work immediately," Shapiro writes. "According to evidence in the heated legal battle that followed, their appearance quickly drew a crowd – friends and tenants of Allen's as well as supporters of the Chamberlain's Men, including Ellen Burbage, James' feisty widow." Allen's friends tried to block the demolition, but quickly found themselves out-numbered and had to retreat.

Keeping the crowd at bay with a mixture of lies and threats, Burbage and his crew had all The Theatre's timbers stacked on carts by nightfall and stored away in a secret Thames-side warehouse before midnight. The ice in the Thames that Christmas made boat crossings impossible and the tolls due if they'd tried to transport the timber across London Bridge were prohibitive, so they waited till the thaw of Spring 1599 before shipping the wood across the river and adding it to the foundations now dug at their new site.

"One can only imagine how furious Allen must have been when he returned to where The Theatre had stood and found it gone, the grass trampled, his field littered with mounds of plaster and shattered tile," Shapiro writes.

In he lawsuit that followed, Allen said the Lord Chamberlain's Men had been "riotous, armed with diverse and many unlawful and offensive weapons, pulling, breaking and throwing down the said theatre in very outrageous, violent and riotous sort, to the great disturbance and terrifying of diverse others."

Targeting Street as the man whose expertise had made the whole operation possible, Allen demanded £800 in compensation and punitive damages, but the court found against him. I like to think the decision went that way because the judge couldn't help admiring Burbage & Co's sheer cheek.

## Appendix X: The best little whorehouse on Bankside

The biggest and best of the 17<sup>th</sup> century Bankside stewhouses was created and run by a woman named Elizabeth Holland. Holland's Leaguer, as this castle-like mansion in Paris Gardens was known, offered such fine levels of service and hygiene that even King James I was a regular customer.

Elizabeth Holland was this woman's married name, which may indicate she'd wed into the family of gangsters who then ran much of Southwark's underworld. Her husband disappears from the story almost immediately, leaving the young Elizabeth to fend for herself at some point in the 1590s. She made the mistake of setting up her first brothel inside London's City walls, which led to her being arrested in 1597 and sent to Newgate gaol. Fortunately, she'd already made enough money to ensure herself a reasonably comfortable life in Newgate until her fine was fully paid off, at which point she fled to Southwark before any physical punishment could follow. From that point onwards, she vowed, anyone hoping to arrest her again had better come with an army in tow.

By 1603, Holland had rented a large manor house in Paris Gardens from Queen Elizabeth I's cousin Lord Hunsdon and was ready to open for business again. The word "leaguer" at the time had connotations of both castles and whorehouses, which made it doubly appropriate for her new premises. "The house itself was a grand mansion that stood by the river and was fortified with a moat, drawbridge and portcullis," says Melissa Hope Ditmore in her *Encyclopaedia of Prostitution*. "What is striking about Holland's Leaguer is the way it was set up as a female community set apart from the rest of society – the drawbridge being the main means by which visitors could gain entrance to the establishment."<sup>(39)</sup>

The Leaguer, like all Southwark's other leading brothels at this time, modelled itself on a great inn, with the whole establishment revolving round its central courtyard. "The reception rooms were on the ground floor, facing on to the courtyard, which was entered through a great arch big enough to allow coaches to pass," Burford explains. "Next to the reception rooms would have been a restaurant and a bar – or perhaps several to cater for clients of different status and means. The women's chambers would have been upstairs."<sup>(193)</sup>

In her own book, *The Picara*, Anne Kaler adds that Elizabeth began using the professional name Madame Donna Britannica Holland. "This change of name allowed Elizabeth to follow the old custom that brothel madams were either Flemish or French and the tradition that continental harlots knew their business better than British ones," she writes.<sup>(194)</sup>

Its position in the slightly less built-up area of Paris Gardens gave Holland's Leaguer a measure of protection from the plague which periodically ravaged Southwark's poorer and more crowded parishes. Madame Donna Britannica also had the good sense to ensure a much higher standard of cleanliness than you'd find anywhere on Bankside. She was running a classy operation here and neither the girls nor their clients were allowed to forget it. "Holland's Leaguer's popularity depended on the business-like atmosphere, its good food, luxurious surroundings, modern plumbing, medical inspections, clean linens and high-class prostitutes," Kaler writes.

Reports of the facilities on offer at Holland's Leaguer mention portraits of the establishment's most beautiful girls for gentlemen to choose among over a glass of wine, a summerhouse in the grounds for discrete assignations and a regular supply of plump new virgins shipped in from the Surrey countryside. It's even said Holland had a plaque made reading "James Stuart slept here", which she displayed in the main reception room.<sup>(195)</sup>

On the enforcement side, she employed an armed bouncer, said to be an enormous ex-con who was soppy devoted to her. When push came to shove, there was a spot on the river bank where unwanted guests could be unceremoniously thrown in the Thames.

Holland's Leaguer continued in happy prosperity till 1631, when Charles I decided to demonstrate his piety by ordering this notorious whorehouse must be shut down. "When a troop of soldiers arrived to enforce the closure, Holland enticed them on to the drawbridge, which she then let down [into the water], depositing the men in the moat," Ditmore writes. "The prostitutes then proceeded to empty the contents of their chamber pots over the soldiers, who swiftly

retreated.”

The girls could keep up this resistance only so long, however and the troops did eventually force them to close. Holland herself escaped and some accounts say her establishment enjoyed a brief resurgence in the Restoration, but its glory days were already over. The 1632 closure inspired both a stage play and a ballad, neither of which were inclined to take Charles I’s censorious line. The street leading to the Leaguer’s spot on the Bankside is still called Holland Street today and you’ll find it just behind Tate Modern.

## Appendix XI: Redcross Way's "nest of thieves"

In 1865, *The Lancet* wrote that the area round Redcross Way hosted "a nest of thieves which has existed ever since the days of Edward III". Here's a few examples drawn from the Old Bailey transcripts suggesting they may have been right.

**June 1709:** Richard Hughes, hours before his execution at Tyburn, confesses to a string of robberies, including one at a Tobacconist's House in Redcross Way.

**October 1730:** Christopher Cornick, Edward Welsh and James Dickson go into the Golden Hind pub in Redcross Way and order a pint of beer. The barmaid, Jane Bordwell, serves it up to them in a silver tankard, then leaves the bar to take her child upstairs. As soon as she's out of the way, the three men leg it with the tankard. The landlady's son and a couple of Golden Hind staff chase them down the street, but Cornick is the only one they catch. He's tried at The Old Bailey, found guilty and sentenced to transportation. The tankard is never recovered.

**September 1744:** Patrick Askin, Luke Ryley and John MacEvoy hold up William Hall's coach in Frog Lane, Islington, then flee to Askin's lodgings in Redcross Way. Getting there about 11:00pm, they set about dividing their booty, which includes Hall's bright red coat and about ten guineas in cash. Edward Frost, another resident in the house, grows suspicious and peeps through the door of Askin's room, where he sees him trying on a scarlet coat. Askin later confesses, agreeing to give evidence against his friends and so it's only Ryley and MacEvoy who hang at Tyburn the following month. Askin is sent into the army instead.

**May 1745:** Jeremiah Burton, a pickpocket living at Three Tuns Court in Redcross Way, is sentenced to death for stealing a silver watch. A gap in the records means we can't be sure whether he hanged or not.

**February 1755:** Elizabeth Williams steals a silk gown, two silver spoons and a handful of other small items from her employer's house in Houndsditch. Some of the stolen goods are later recovered at Armstead's pawnshop in Redcross Way, leading to Williams' conviction and transportation for a term of seven years.

*All details taken from The Old Bailey's archive: <http://www.oldbaileyonline.org/>*

## Appendix XII: Slaves in all but name

Bankside's medieval whores were trapped in slavery just as surely as the Roman captives staffing Southwark's brothels in the first century.

Burford cites research showing that, even in Bankside's most upmarket brothels, each girl was expected to serve as many as 12 men a night. In the mid-priced establishments, a nightly 30 men per girl was about average, he adds and in the cheapest places of all, 50-60 a night was not unknown. That would be a brutally punishing workload even today, but it was all the more so in an era when both penicillin and prophylactics were unknown.<sup>(196)</sup>

"Within three or four years, the girl would be worn out," Burford writes. "With the lack of hygiene and sanitation, all diseases were a hazard. If she caught VD, she would be thrown out. She might perhaps get some sort of treatment from the Lock Hospital, but that was a mixed blessing, because cross-infection through ignorant treatment was frequent."

This raises the question of what such women did when their charms began to fade and the stewhouse no longer wanted them. A fortunate few might find besotted clients prepared to marry them, just as Pope Innocent III had suggested good Christian men should do. The most entrepreneurial might decide to set up as Madams, using the hard-won experience of their own whoring years to run a stable of fresh young talent.<sup>(197)</sup>

For most, though, the only options were to switch to the life of a solo street prostitute – an interim measure at best – or put up with becoming a servant for the same stewhouse girls they'd once worked alongside. Often, this meant a lifetime labouring in the brothel's laundry or kitchen. The smartest such women would have gathered enough knowledge of midwifery, contraception and folk remedies to make themselves indispensable on those grounds and so ensure they were still treated with a measure of respect. But no stewhouse required more than one or two such "wise women" on the staff, which hardly made a dent in the hundreds of exhausted girls Bankside spat out every year.

## Appendix XIII: John Bryan murdered in Redcross Way

“I shall give them blood to drink or they shall give it to me,” Thomas Bryan roared. It was Boxing Night, 1837, in Redcross Way and he was determined to fight his brothers.

John, Jerry and Patrick Bryan all lodged in Redcross Way – Redcross Alley as it then was – with their families and Thomas lived very nearby with his own wife in what’s now St Margaret’s Court. Everything that follows played out within 150 yards of Cross Bones, which was then at the worst of its over-crowded and disease-ridden state. <sup>(198)</sup>

Thomas and Jerry had come to blows in the alley earlier that evening, but women from the family had separated them and dragged Jerry into their shared lodging house while Thomas stalked away. Neighbours later testified that both men had been drinking that night, but that Jerry was the drunker of the two. Now Thomas was back, with his friend Patrick Mahoney and Patrick’s son Daniel in tow. The Mahoneys, too, had their lodgings in Redcross Way. “I am not alone now,” Thomas shouted at the window of the house where his brother had disappeared.

We don’t know what the original quarrel was about, but it seems to have started with a row between the Bryan and the Mahoney women over some arrangement involving godparents. A child’s godmother was then known as his “gossip” and that word had been flung about a great deal by a crowd of women seen screaming at one another in Redcross Way before Thomas and Jerry had their own fight.

Thomas got no response to his challenge, so he left again and the Mahoneys reluctantly followed. Seeing they’d gone, Jerry came out into Redcross Way again and asked with a show of bravado who was looking for him. Thomas had disappeared by now, but the Mahoneys hadn’t retreated quite as far as Jerry thought and they rushed straight back to pin him against the wall. As the women clawed Jerry back inside the house again, John Bryan came out to try and calm everyone down. Nicknamed “John the Iron” for his work as a foundry man, he seems to have been the man his neighbours came to when something in the street needed sorting out. But tonight the Mahoneys were in no mood to listen.

John Grant, a ten-year-old boy, watched what came next from his perch on a railing near the action. “I saw young Mahoney with a poker hitting John Bryan,” he later testified. “I saw the youngest one [Daniel] hit him on the shoulder with the poker. It made him stagger a little and I saw him hit him twice more on the head with the poker. He then fell. He was close by the railing at that time and I was standing over him at the time he was struck.

“Old Mahoney was standing by while the deceased was being knocked down and after he was down he came and kicked him. He kicked him twice after he was down. Then his wife, who was among the women, came and kicked him and kicked him again. I hallooed out ‘Murder’ and the Mahoneys ran away.” <sup>(199)</sup>

Elizabeth Williams was watching the same scene play out from her upstairs window at 4 Redcross Way and confirmed Grant’s account in every detail. One neighbour said Patrick had urged his son on in the attack by saying, “Will you see your mother struck?” But Grant, who’d watched the whole thing, insisted the Bryans had never laid a finger on Mrs Mahoney. <sup>(200)</sup>

Mary Bryan, John’s daughter, was next to arrive. “I found my father laying on the ground,” she said later. “I saw some people running and, suspecting them, I ran after and found it was the two Mahoneys and his [Patrick’s] wife. I called out after them and said, ‘You murdering villains! You have murdered my father!’ Young Mahoney turned round, lifted up a poker and attempted to strike me. But his mother said, ‘Don’t strike the child, whatever you do to the father’ and he did not strike me. I went away into the Borough and called the policemen.”

When the police arrived, John Bryan was able to stagger away with an officer supporting him on either side, but died a few days later in Guy’s Hospital. Dr William Boyd, who examined him there, testified that he’d found a fractured skull and a ruptured artery in John Bryan’s head, but that he could not be certain whether it was Daniel Mahoney’s poker or Patrick’s boot which killed him.

A week later, police had Patrick, Daniel and Thomas under arrest and an Old Bailey trial followed on January 29. The three men were charged with “the wilful murder of John Bryan”, Daniel’s age being given as 18 and Patrick’s as 40. Thomas was acquitted, but Daniel and Patrick

both convicted of manslaughter and sentenced to transportation for life. After an eight-month voyage on board the *Augusta Jessie*, they arrived in Van Diemen's Land on April 10, 1839.

I've found records for two John Bryans buried in Southwark in the first quarter of 1838, but neither was interred in St Saviour's parish, where both Cross Bones and Redcross Way are found. Either the Bryan family had some history in another Southwark parish which entitled them to bury their dead there, or they deliberately avoided a St Saviour's burial because they thought John's bones would be treated more kindly elsewhere.

## Appendix XIV: Meet the Corpse King and his Borough Boys

London's most notorious grave-robbers in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century were The Borough Boys, named for the fact that Southwark was both their base and their favourite hunting ground. The core of the gang – Ben Crouch, Tom Butler and Jack Harnett – had a background as scavengers in the Peninsular War, where they harvested teeth from dead soldiers after each battle was done. Some believe they killed any wounded soldiers they found and then looted their teeth and belongings too. <sup>(201)</sup>

**Ben Crouch:** A former carpenter and prizefighter who became a body-snatcher after a spell working at Guy's Hospital. "He was a dandy, wearing sharp clothes, gold rings and frilled shirts," Dorothy Davies writes. "The surgeons knew him as an artful, impudent, bullying drunk [but that] did not stop them dealing with him." <sup>(143)</sup>

The sheer scale of Crouch's grave-robbing operation, combined with his flamboyant personality, led to him being nicknamed The Corpse King. He handled the gang's negotiations with surgeons, charging two or three guineas for an adult corpse (that is to say, one taller than three feet) and up to a guinea for children. He's said to have secured upfront fees of as much 50 guineas at a single time for corpses to be delivered later. <sup>(202)</sup>

Crouch retired from the body-snatching trade with enough money to buy himself a small seaside hotel. His reputation soon caught up with him, though, customers began avoiding the place and he died in poverty.

**Tom Butler:** Crouch's former partner in their Peninsular War activity. Doubled as a dealer in bones and teeth.

**Tom Light:** A former gentleman's gentleman who, as Davies puts it "didn't think too well". The gang must have found him something of a liability and he lasted only a few years in the body-snatching business. "He was a clumsy worker and ended up in custody too often," Brian Bailey writes.

I imagine Light as a Satanic version of Lenny from John Steinbeck's *Of Mice & Men*: strong on brawn, but with a very tiny brain. He was once caught while trying to drag three corpses over the wall of a graveyard into London's busy Pancras Road. On another occasion, he was arrested carting seven bodies up Holborn Hill in broad daylight. <sup>(203)</sup>

**Joseph Naples:** An ex-Navy man who served with Nelson's forces at Cape St Vincent. After his discharge, Naples took a job digging graves at Clerkenwell's Spa Fields, where he moonlighted selling the ground's corpses to the Guy's Hospital surgeon Sir Astley Cooper.

In 1802, Naples was caught, sacked and sentenced to a prison term, but by that time Sir Astley thought him too valuable a supplier to lose. He intervened with Lord Pelham, the Home Secretary, who ensured Naples was released. From that point on, he worked full-time with Crouch's gang. Naples kept the accounts for The Borough Boys, meticulously noting down every body they stole. It's thought he also wrote the anonymous 1812 *Diary of a Resurrectionist* later recovered and published by the Royal College of Surgeons.

After the Anatomy Act was passed in 1832, Naples retired from the body-snatching business, trading his testimony to a House of Commons committee for immunity. He was later given a job in St Thomas Hospital's dissection room.

**Bill Hollis:** Another former gravedigger who moonlighted selling corpses direct to surgeons. The gangs didn't like gravediggers cutting them out of the loop like this and ensured Hollis got the sack by informing against him. He had no choice but to join Crouch's gang, where his old skills proved useful.



**Patrick Murphy:** Succeeded Crouch as The Borough Boys' leader. His greatest coup was netting £144 for 12 corpses in a single day, a sum worth over £10,000 today. One of the two surgeons who bought them was Naples' friend Sir Astley Cooper.

At various times the gang also included Bill Harnett and Jack Hutton. Ben Crouch, Patrick Murphy and Jack Harnett (Bill's nephew) seem to be the only three members who got out with any worthwhile amount of money. The rest spent it all as they went along and ended with nothing.

## Appendix XV: Alice Lofthouse murdered in Redcross Way

William Gould had what we'd today call a portfolio career: at the age of just 26, he was already part market trader, part cellar-man and part pimp.

His half share in a market barrow selling fruit and flowers around Southwark never provided enough income on its own, so he moonlighted with occasional kitchen or cellar work in Redcross Way's lodging houses and the surrounding pubs. He was also a member of the area's most feared street gang, though whether the pimping was a gang venture or the young man's private initiative is unclear.

Gould got back to his own lodgings at 3 Redcross Way about 8:30pm on Saturday July 16, 1898, stowed his barrow away and went to the house's communal kitchen. For the past six months, he'd shared his bed there with Alice Lofthouse, a 23-year-old woman who'd left her soldier husband in August the previous year. The three things everyone knew about Lofthouse were that she was generally drunk, often violent and none too fussy about who she slept with. <sup>(198, 204, 205)</sup>

Lofthouse was there in the kitchen with several other residents when Gould walked in and began playing with the house's friendly dog. He'd no sooner sat down than she started on at him. Alfred Ford, one of the others sat in the kitchen that night, later testified that Lofthouse called Gould "a fucking ponce" and demanded that he give her the money she was owed. "She screamed out 'Where's my money, you bastard?' within minutes of Gould arriving home," Ford told a coroner's jury. "He said 'Give me time'. She kept on and he walked out and went to a public house." <sup>(206)</sup>

We use the word "ponce" much more loosely now, but its Victorian meaning was quite precise. Dictionaries agree that it began as a bit of thieves' slang meaning: "a harlot's bully" (Partridge); "one who lives off the earnings of prostitutes" (Cassell); or "another word for 'pimp'" (Collins). It's pretty clear what Lofthouse was accusing Gould of here and easy to imagine him sending her out whoring when times were hard.

Lofthouse stalked off after Gould when he left, following him to a pub called the One Distillery in nearby Borough High Street. Albert Gould, William's uncle, was already sitting at the bar there when his nephew and Lofthouse walked in. "She called him a foul name and started nagging him," Albert later testified. "She asked for a drink and he told her she could have what she liked." Another drinker who'd been present added: "He said, 'You can have a glass of ale', so she had it. He paid for it. He then went out and she followed him."

By now, Eliza Bailey had joined the crowd in number 3's kitchen. She'd called round hoping to find a room for her brother, who'd recently lost his job, and was sitting there with her baby when Gould and Lofthouse returned. "She and the prisoner [Gould] were quarrelling dreadfully," Bailey testified. "He said, 'Will you be quiet! You are drunk now!' I did not hear her answer, but she made an attempt to pick up a ginger beer bottle. She picked it up from the table and attempted to throw it, but did not do so.

"The prisoner then got on to the table and kicked her several times in the face and ribs. She was sitting down by the table and he had heavy boots. He kicked her with all his might. She said, 'Oh don't hurt me' and she ran to another table. He picked up a poker from the fireplace, got on to the table and he hit her with it twice. He hit her twice across the back of the neck and once across the back." Ford saw the attack too. "They were jawing together," he testified. "There was a bar of iron on the right-hand side of the fireplace and I saw him hit her with it – I think it was on the back of the neck – and she fell forward. I did not hear her speak again."

The other women in the kitchen gathered round Alice and concluded she was not dead, but only in a faint. Someone sent a boy to run for the doctor. "The prisoner came round to me and said, 'If you screen me, I will see you all right'," Bailey testified, adding that she did not reply. "I had never seen him or the woman before," she said.

No doctor appeared, so Gould and his uncle went to find help themselves. They returned with Dr Michael Burt, who'd had a quite different account of the attack from William on his way to the house. "He said he had pushed her off a form [a bench]," Burt testified. "When I got there, I saw the deceased lying on the floor between the form and the table. There was a frothy fluid

proceeding from her nose, which was a sign that there was animation, but she never recovered consciousness. The prisoner came to see me at midnight, made a statement to me and I told him to go and report at the station.”

Gould did so, pitching up at the local cop shop in the early hours of Sunday morning and speaking to Inspector Samuel Denham. The inspector summed up his statement like this: “I am living with a woman. I am not married to her. I have had a quarrel and pushed her over a table and she is dead”. Gould was sober, he added, but seemed distressed. Police formally charged him with manslaughter at Southwark Police Court next morning, Monday July 18, where *The Sun* reported that Gould “entered the dock with a jaunty air and in no way seemed to appreciate the seriousness of his position”. He was refused bail and returned to his cell.<sup>(207)</sup>

The next step was the Coroner’s Inquest, scheduled to begin next day and that’s where all Hell broke loose. Gould’s friends – presumably other members of the gang - turned out in force whenever police had to move him. Their first opportunity to cause trouble came when the coroner granted Gould’s request to view Lofthouse’s body. “The prisoner on his way to the mortuary to view the corpse was hailed with cries of ‘Cheer up, Fatty’ and ‘You’ll be all right, Bill’,” the *Daily Mail* reported. “Immediately he got outside the Coroner’s Court, the officers in charge of him were assailed by a savage mob, evidently bent on rescuing the prisoner. Six constables, three detectives and two inspectors were required to get him safely to the mortuary and back and five persons had to be removed to the police station, the officers being hooted all the way.”<sup>(208, 209)</sup>

At the inquest hearing itself, Bailey gave her testimony about Gould asking her to “screen him” and he burst out shouting in reply. “It’s a lie,” he yelled across the court. “That’s what the detectives put into her head”. Asked why she’d never mentioned Gould’s approach earlier, Bailey said: “Because I was afraid. I had been threatened that if I said anything, I should be served the same as the deceased.” Detective-sergeant Divall told the court he knew of another witness who “could entirely corroborate” Bailey’s statement, but that this witness had also been threatened and refused to give evidence as a result.

William Lofthouse, the husband Alice had walked out on, gave evidence at the inquest hearing too. He was a private in the Rifle Brigade and said he’d married her in September 1895, but found she was “violent, bad-tempered and addicted to drink and promiscuous infidelity”. She’d walked out on him three times before their final break-up, but he’d always taken her back saying he didn’t care who she’d been with in the interim. He’d come to the inquest, he added, because he wanted to “take a look” at the man who killed her.<sup>(210, 211)</sup>

After a long deliberation, the coroner’s jury returned a verdict of wilful murder against Gould, adding that he’d acted “under great provocation”. There was more tumult when police tried to get him out of the court and back to his cell. “As the prisoner was being moved, another ineffectual attempt was made to rescue him,” the *Mail* reported. “The jurors were mobbed and had to be protected by police.

“Two female friends of Gould’s named Burke and O’Connell were brought up at the Southwark Police Court later in the day and charged with creating a disturbance. The police stated that they had behaved like wild beasts. Burke was fined twenty shillings and O’Connell ordered to find a surety or go to prison for 14 days.”<sup>(212)</sup>

“Thomas Edwards, a hulking match-seller, was then charged with savagely assaulting two constables who were on special duty in Redcross [Way] for the protection of witnesses. He was sentenced to two months’ hard labour.”<sup>(213)</sup>

Police upped the formal charge against Gould from manslaughter to murder on July 26, after the courageous Eliza Bailey helped them recover the bloody poker from 3 Redcross Way. His Old Bailey trial for murder began on September 13, by which time the gang seem to have briefed several witnesses of its own. One of these was Jane Page, who described herself in court as “a single woman” living “in the neighbourhood of Red Cross Court”. She’d also been in number 3’s kitchen that night, she said, but offered a quite different version of events. Page’s account agreed with Ford’s and Bailey’s up to the point where Lofthouse picked up the ginger beer bottle, but she said Lofthouse had actually thrown it at Gould.<sup>(214)</sup>

“She went to go towards him and she staggered and fell over the table as she got on the form,” Page claimed. “She got on the form and tried to jump on the table, but fell back off the form. I saw her fall. [...] She was very drunk. The prisoner was sober. I remained there till the

doctor came. The prisoner was very kind to the deceased. [...] I did not see him strike her. I did not see him take the poker in his hands. He never struck her with it.”

Under cross-examination, Page immediately changed her story, now saying that Gould had pushed Lofthouse off the bench rather than simply watching her fall. “She was standing on the form when he pushed her,” Page said. “As she fell forward, she jumped and threw herself on her head backwards. She had got on the form, put her foot on the table and fell on the back of her head. She was on the table when he gave her the push.”

Albert Gould told a similar story. “All I noticed him do was give her a push,” he testified. “She fell against a form.” Under cross-examination, he added: “I did not see the poker used, nor the woman kicked in the face”. Both Albert Gould and Alfred Ford testified that William was “a teetotaler”, who’d drunk only “a small lemon” at the One Distillery on the fatal night. So firmly were they agreed on this point that each used an identical form of words to convey it.

That’s not the only reason to take all three of these witnesses’ testimony with a pinch of salt. Page’s account has the ring of someone who’s set out to show Gould was entirely innocent and then been forced to amend her story as she went along. Albert Gould was William’s uncle, liable to protect him for that reason alone, and Alfred Ford looks to have been another member of the Redcross Way gang. Ford later admitted he’d been drunk himself both at the time of Lofthouse’s death and while giving his first statement to police. He was 20 years old at the time and the *South London Chronicle* described him as “a lad of the hooligan type”. When Gould’s trial began, Ford had just emerged from a month in jail for his drunken misbehaviour in Redcross Way and Borough High Street.

For more reliable evidence, the trial turned to Dr Burt, who’d carried out a post-mortem on Lofthouse, finding she had a fractured skull with shards of broken bone driven into the brain beneath. “It would have taken very considerable violence to cause that,” he told the court. Shown the weapon found at Redcross Way, he added: “It was such a fracture as might be caused by this iron poker. In my opinion, a fall on the bare floor could not have done it.”

Gould’s defence relied on the fact that Ford and Bailey had described poker blows to Lofthouse’s neck and back rather than her head, and pressed Burt on this point under cross examination. What of Page’s account? Could it not be the accidental blow to the head she described which had killed Lofthouse?

Burt was clearly sceptical, but had to admit he could not rule this out altogether. “If she had been thrown with great force, or if she had fallen from a considerable height on to a corner of the table or form, that might be possible,” he replied. “[But] a fall from the form to the floor would not cause it.” That small seed of doubt – combined, perhaps with a bit more intimidation from the gang - was enough to save Gould from a murder charge and the hanging that would almost certainly have followed. Instead, the jury found him guilty of manslaughter and he was sentenced to 15 years penal servitude.

The newspapers had a field day with Gould’s case, plastering every account with the newly-coined word “Hooligan” to describe him and his friends. We can gauge the Cross Bones area’s reputation in 1898 from the headline *The South London Chronicle* chose to sum up Lofthouse’s death: “Another Borough Tragedy: Notorious Red Cross Court Again”.<sup>(213)</sup>

I’ve found a St Saviour’s burial record for a woman called Alice Lofthouse, interred there in the third quarter of 1898. This woman’s age is given as 26, which is within a reasonable margin of error for our 23-year-old Alice. There’s no indication where in the parish of St Saviour’s this burial took place, but Cross Bones was already closed so she certainly didn’t finish up there.

*For details of another interesting 1890s murder involving Redcross Way, see PlanetSlade’s [The Borough Mystery](#). That tale started as an appendix here, but soon grew into a full article of its own.*

## Sources & footnotes

### Chapter 1: The Romans

- 1) *The Bishop's Brothels*, by EJ Burford (Robert Hale Ltd, 1976). I've drawn very heavily on Burford's book for the first half of this narrative. For anyone with an interest in the seamier side of London history – Southwark's history in particular – it's an essential and hugely entertaining read.
- 2) Even bakers and cookshops had slaves for this purpose – known as the *elicariae* - who were sent out to the roadside selling cakes shaped like male and female genitalia. The understanding was that anyone selling these cakes would double as a prostitute when necessary. Competing with them were the independent whores Romans called *noctilae* ("night moths") and those prepared to accept even the lowest copper coin made for their services – the *quadrantariae*.
- 3) The *stola*, a long pleated dress, was seen as the mark of a respectable woman in Rome and for a prostitute to wear one would have been considered serious misrepresentation. This idea returned to Southwark with the 12<sup>th</sup> century ban on whores wearing aprons.
- 4) *Underground London*, by Stephen Smith (Abacus, 2004)
- 5) Here's Burford describing the goings-on at one of Harpocrates' celebrations: "Crowds of crazed women would dance and cavort, exposing themselves stark naked and copulating publicly with all comers. Females would hang garlands on the god's enormous penis, as many as they had had lovers the previous night. Often, the penis would be completely ringed and covered from sight with the offerings of a single woman."

### Chapter 2: Arriving at the vigil

- 6) The lights are a Southwark Council art project, unveiled in August 2008.
- 7) My notes from that night read: "*Guardian*-reading, cat-loving, vaguely mystical types, often quite mumsy. Kind-hearted and well-meaning. Not as nutty as you might imagine – no fancy dress. Handful of men only. One well-groomed hippy type with long hair and beard. A Japanese girl. Some quite young women: 20s rather than 30s".
- 8) Personal interview at Nelson's café, Southwark, November 2012.
- 9) *I Was An Alien Sex God* is full of LSD references, so I couldn't resist asking Constable if his meeting with The Goose had been pharmaceutically assisted in any way. He told me he'd taken nothing at all on that particular night.
- 10) *The Southwark Mysteries*, by John Constable (Oberon Books, 1999).
- 11) Cross Bones is, quite literally, just around the corner from an excellent little London theatre called The Menier Chocolate Factory. Whenever I went to a play there, I'd nip out to Redcross Way during the interval to see if anything interesting had been added to the gates since my last visit. The Menier's won a huge reputation for its staging of Stephen Sondheim musicals and Sondheim himself has visited the theatre several times. I often wonder if anyone there has ever taken this opportunity to show him Cross Bones.
- 12) All the Guadalupe decorations were carefully removed and taken home after the night's celebrations, as they would certainly have been stolen otherwise. One of my favourite examples of the gentle humour often expressed at Cross Bones was the crocheted ornament attached to its gates in 2011, mounted on a cardboard surround warning: "Crochet thieves operate in this area".

### Chapter 3: Laying siege

- 13) If you're wondering how to pronounce "Southwark", just add a "k" to the end of "mother" and make it rhyme with that. It's "Suhth-erk", with a slight emphasis on the first syllable.
- 14) About half of William's army was made up of foreign mercenaries, most of them Flemish, and this may explain how Flemish women later gained such a strong hold over Southwark's brothels.
- 15) From the BBC website's [Christianity in Britain](#).
- 16) Personal interview at Southwark's John Harvard Library, November 2012. This library's named after the founder of Harvard University, whose family once owned a Borough High Street

coaching inn called The Queen's Head. John left Southwark for Boston in 1637 after the rest of his family was wiped out by plague.

- 17) The Church made this problem even worse in 1129 when it ruled that all priests must in future be celibate. Priests who were already married were told to evict their wives from the family home, putting yet another wave of destitute women on the streets.

#### **Chapter 4: Samhain at the gates**

- 18) *Honouring The Outcast Dead: The Cross Bones Graveyard*, by Dr Adrian Harris.
- 19) There weren't enough leaves in the bundle for everyone in the crowd to get one. Having shuffled forward so determinedly to make sure I got a leaf, though, I was damned if I was going to give it up. This suggests that my own spirituality still has some way to go.
- 20) Quote taken from JandBFrench's short YouTube film *Where The Prostitutes Were Buried in London*.
- 21) Some people never did find the right moment to read out their own ribbon, either because they were slightly embarrassed at the procedure or because they were reluctant to pipe up when others were talking. I think some people decided to take their ribbons home as souvenirs rather than attach them to the gates – something I was sorely tempted to do myself.
- 22) It was only after the ceremony ended that I noticed I'd been so intent on making sure the knot in Eliza's ribbon held firmly, that I'd managed to tie it right in the middle of her name. Fortunately, the age and date draped down nicely on either side of the knot, so I smoothed those into place instead.
- 23) The knots required often make it hard to read the full details on any Cross Bones ribbon, either in photographs or on the gates themselves. I have managed to transcribe a few though: "February 14<sup>th</sup>, 1785. Jane Jollif, a widow, aged 41 years"; "July 1840. Elizabeth Lade, Hart Inn, Age 1 year 6 months"; "Winter 1837, William Pearce"; "23<sup>rd</sup> October, 1833. Jane Stevens, Union Street, two years old"; "October 31<sup>st</sup>, 1728. Sarah Whitehead" and; "December 25<sup>th</sup>, 1726. Mary, wife of George Wilson, a carpenter".
- 24) Letter to *The Times*, November 10, 1883.
- 25) One Friends of Cross Bones supporter has proposed a monument to Britain's prostitutes as part of any memorial garden that's eventually built there. His design shows Christine Keeler in [this](#) famous pose.
- 26) A Book of Hours was a medieval volume collecting the particular prayers to be recited at each of the day's seven canonical hours: Matins, Prime, Terce, Sext, Nones, Vespers and Compline. The idea was that lay Christians could use these books to copy the daily routine of a monastery.
- 27) Cheap gin was one of the very few comforts available to the women destined for a Cross Bones burial and that's why it's become so central to the site's rituals. Gin's popularity among women later gave it the nickname "mother's ruin".

#### **Chapter 5: Birth of the Liberty**

- 28) This principle gives us benefit of clergy and Psalm 51's role as the "neck verse". At a time when literacy was rare, simply showing you could read was taken as ample proof you were a member of the clergy. By reading Psalm 51 aloud in court ("Oh God, have mercy upon me..."), a defendant could establish the secular courts had no right to try him and so escape a possible sentence of hanging. The principle was later extended to anyone who could read – clergy or not - and saved Ben Jonson's life when he was charged with manslaughter in 1598. Benefit of clergy's scope was steadily eroded over the following 200 years, but it wasn't finally abolished in Britain until 1823.
- 29) "These estates were later to become known as 'the Liberty of the Bishop of Winchester', Burford continues. "Indeed, they may have been so designated even at this early date, but contemporary records are lost."
- 30) In the 225 years from 1330 to 1555, England had six Lord Chancellors who were also Bishop of Winchester, accounting for 29 years of the Chancellorship between them. Outside the royal family itself, only the Lord High Steward of England had more power than the Lord Chancellor.
- 31) When Burford's book was published in 1976, many scientists thought syphilis may have been present (though unidentified) in Europe as early as the sixth century. But a 2011 study produced convincing evidence that the disease was brought to Europe by sailors returning from the Americas after Christopher Columbus's 1492 voyage. Atlanta's Emory University analysed 54 published reports identifying syphilis in skeletons from before 1492, but concluded that either the diagnosis or the bones' own dating was mistaken in every case.

- 32) Bishops had other ways of profiting from sexual desire in this era too. Priests at the time were technically celibate, but could pay the Bishop ruling their diocese a fee called a couillage which licensed them to keep a servant called a hearth girl living in their house. These girls, as Burford puts it, “kindled other fires as well”. Rabelais, with his characteristic frankness, called the couillage fees “bollock money”.
- 33) Dr Johnson did much of the work on his 1755 dictionary while staying at The Anchor on Bankside, so he knew the area well. Defining a stew as “a brothel or house of prostitution”, he adds: “The signification is by some imputed to this, that there were licensed brothels near the stews or fishponds in Southwark; but probably stew, like bagnio, took a bad signification from bad use.” One of the sources Johnson cites for this is Act 5, Scene 1 of Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure*, where the punning Duke Vincentio says: “I have seen corruption boil and bubble / ‘Til it o’er run the stew”.
- 34) “Centuries later, Charles II was enraged to discover that his parliamentary supporters were in the brothels when they should have been [voting],” Burford says. “One of the King’s vital measures was lost as a result.”
- 35) *The Medieval Castle in England & Wales: A Political & Social History*, by Norman Pounds (Cambridge University Press, 1993).
- 36) The Bishop’s court officials may also have been keen to crack down on low-level corruption among constables and bailiffs to prevent bribes being skimmed off at that stage. Only if a case came to trial could the court’s officials hope to be bribed instead.
- 37) London’s had many colourful street names which owe their origins to medieval prostitution. The most notorious example is Gropecunt Lane, an alleyway off Cheapside first recorded under that name in 1279. It was flanked by Burdell Lane (an early version of Bordello Lane) and Puppekirty Lane (Poke-skirt Lane), but all three have since been obliterated by development. Oxford’s Magpie Lane and Norwich’s Opie Street were both once known as Gropecunt Lane too and for precisely the same reason. The name didn’t finally fall out of use in Britain until 1561.
- 38) Fifteenth century Paris had Rue Grattecon, Rue Poilecon and Rue de la Con Reerie. Readers are cordially invited to translate these names for themselves.
- 39) *Encyclopedia of Prostitution & Sex Work Volume 1*, by Melissa Hope Ditmore (Greenwood Publishing, 2006).

### **Chapter 6: Emily’s plaque**

- 40) *South London Press*, November 6, 1998.
- 41) One of the most powerful moments I experienced at the theatre in 2011 came while watching Alecky Blythe’s *London Road* at the National. Blythe tells the story of the Ipswich murders mostly from the point of view of people living in the town’s red light district, but reserves one scene for the victims alone. Five actresses representing Gemma, Anneli, Paula, Netty and Tania stood stock-still on a silent stage, glaring out at the audience for what felt like a very long time. “Don’t you *dare* forget us,” they seemed to be saying. “Don’t you fucking *dare*!”
- 42) *Financial Times*, December 27, 2008.
- 43) The Hop Cellars is still a pub, but now it’s called The Wheatsheaf.
- 44) *The Independent*, October 31, 2009.

### **Chapter 7: The Black Death**

- 45) *Rosa Anglica*, by John of Gaddesden (1280-1361). Quoted in Burford, above. John hints his treatment will prevent unwanted pregnancy too.
- 46) John Wycliffe, the 14<sup>th</sup> Century religious dissident, warned that monks and friars at this time were claiming medical knowledge in order to seduce local women. They targeted women whose men were away from home for some reason and told them no woman could remain healthy without regular sex. In *Of the Leaven of Pharisees* Wycliffe writes: “When Lords [husbands] are away from home in wars or in justice or in parliament or in other lordships and when merchants do be in the country and when plowmen do be all day long in the fields, then these pharisees [lecherous ones] run fast to their wives under cover of holiness and fornicate with them.”
- 47) Other whore-packed Southwark streets, such as Maiden Lane and Love Lane, were named more ironically. The sarcastic wit applied in christening these streets often ensures their names survive where cruder ones did not. You’ll still find Maiden Lane on the Southwark map today.

- 48) Henry Harben's 1915 *Dictionary of London* tracks one alleyway's name changing from Shitteborwelane (1272) via Shitbourn Lane (1394) and Shetenborn Lane (1539) to the innocuous Sherborne Lane today. "Burn" is an old Scots word for stream and this alleyway seems once to have been a popular public convenience: Shitstream Lane.
- 49) Rick Powell from the UK's Federation of Burial & Cremation Authorities told me a buried adult body takes about 12 years to reduce itself to bones and a child's just six. In times of plague, bodies were often disinterred much sooner.
- 50) *Death, Religion and the Family in England 1480-1750*, by Ralph Houlbrooke (Clarendon Press, 1998).
- 51) My understanding is that cases of murder in the Liberty went to the King's courts rather than the Bishop's. Perhaps the Bishop's court simply recorded these two cases before passing them to the King for trial?
- 52) This episode came as part of the Peasants' Revolt. Tyler's men were rebelling against a poll tax imposed by Richard II and demanding an end to the social structure that kept them in serfdom. Tyler was killed two days after the Southwark massacre when he confronted both the King and Walworth at Smithfield and some accounts say Walworth himself dealt the fatal blow. The revolt petered out at that point and Tyler's head was later displayed on London Bridge as a warning to anyone else who felt like making trouble.
- 53) *The Westminster Chronicle 1381-1394*, ed. LC Hector (Clarendon Press, 1982)
- 54) *Medieval Southwark*, by Martha Carlin (Hambledon Press, 1996). Stewholders were expected to be married men, whose houses were to be used as brothels only.
- 55) Among the single women who supported themselves without prostitution in Southwark, the most common trades were preparing food or peddling it through the streets (26%), textiles work such as spinning yarn (25%) or working as a seamstress (21%). "This suggests that most of the female householders of Southwark had slender economic resources, insufficient to keep a shop, a stock of goods or expensive tools," Carlin writes.
- 56) This was the raucous England of Geoffrey Chaucer, who wrote *The Canterbury Tales* in the 1390s, using a real Southwark tavern called The Tabard as the book's first setting. In her own tale, the Wife of Bath reminds her grumpy husband that she could easily earn a living without him just by selling what's between her legs: "If I would sell my pretty thing / I could walk as new-clothed as a rose / But I will keep it for your own pleasure".
- 57) I don't know how long Brenchesle and Osteler were kept in the Tower of London, or indeed if they ever emerged. Richard II, the man who'd sent them there, ended up in the Tower himself in 1399, where he was imprisoned before being taken to his death in Pontefract Castle.
- 58) By "canal dung" the report means filth from the sewer ditches.
- 59) In March 1543, a gang of hooligans including the Earl of Surrey was brought to court for taking a row boat out on the Thames and using catapults to fire stones at the whores hanging out of the Bankside windows. Their punishment is not recorded.

## Chapter 8: The Invisible Gardener

- 60) Calling our cafe meeting an interview makes my role sound far more important than it was. John's so passionate about Cross Bones that all I really had to do there was ask a single opening question, then sit back and let him talk. He scarcely paused for breath until about 40 minutes in and then only because he'd made a particularly expansive gesture which sent coffee flying everywhere!
- 61) For my full account of William Kirwan's murder see [The Borough Mystery](#) elsewhere on PlanetSlade.
- 62) The most interesting piece of recent graffiti on the door that day read: "RIP to the sket you used to beat! Her days are over. Devonport RIP". Sket is a slang term roughly equivalent to "slag" or "ho" and still current usage among British youth as recently as 2011. Whether you take the tone of this message as gleeful or mournful, it suggests that a whole new generation has discovered Cross Bones and understands its role.
- 63) [London SE1 Community Website](#). Porter's unfortunate tone in this post makes him sound like a rather prim poverty tourist. To give him credit, though, he does seem to have drawn the state of Cross Bones to the police and council's attention and perhaps this helped to prompt the clean-up that followed.
- 64) Transport for London owns the Cross Bones site, but leases it out to Network Rail for work on the Thameslink project. Network Rail uses the northern half of the site to store its vehicles, but has so far left the southern half – where the graves themselves are located – alone.



- 65) *The Independent*, March 15, 2009. The 40-storey Swiss Re building, better known as The Gherkin, is clearly visible from Cross Bones.
- 66) *Sunday Times*, September 20, 2009.
- 67) This piece appears on The Cross Bones Chronicles website (<http://crossbonesgraveyard.wordpress.com/2008/06/25/23rd-june-2008-solstice-vigil/>), but the writer's not credited by name. The Museum of London (MoL) excavation mentioned is their 1993 dig at Cross Bones, which we'll come to later.
- 68) When I last visited Cross Bones in August 2013, a chunky new bike chain had appeared locking the site door tight shut against its jamb. What this will mean for future access and maintenance remains to be seen.

### **Chapter 9: Farewell to the stews**

- 69) Syphilis takes its name from a 1530 poem by Girolamo Fracastoro. He invented a mythical shepherd called Syphilus who insults the Sun God and is struck down with a hideous disease whose symptoms matched the new infection sweeping Europe. When he chose the name Syphilus, Fracastoro may have wanted his readers to think of Sisyphus and that character's own unending pain.
- 70) Among the common people, syphilis was known either as "the great pox" (to distinguish it from smallpox), or named for whichever country the speaker's native land happened to dislike most. The English and the Italians called it The French Disease, the French called it The Spanish Disease, the Russians called it The Polish Disease, the Polish and the Persians called it The Turkish Disease, the Indians called it The Portuguese Disease and the Tahitians called it The British Disease. In Germany it was known as The French Evil, in Japan it was The Chinese Pox and in Muslim Turkey people called it The Christian Disease.
- 71) *The Guardian*, May 17, 2013.
- 72) The first use of condoms for disease control seems to have come around 1550, when the Italian anatomist Gabriele Fallopio tested a sheath made of sheep's intestines, which tied at the base of the penis with a ribbon. He concluded that it prevented transmission of syphilis, but it would be another century before the idea caught on in Britain. Until the early 1900s, when the first disposable condoms were introduced, the gentleman gave his sheath a quick rinse out after every encounter, then tucked it back in his wallet for further use.
- 73) Venice had a reputation for running Europe's most hygienic and best-organised brothels, where the girls were said to be both elegant and well-mannered. If syphilis couldn't be controlled even there, what chance did less punctilious cities have?
- 74) Winchester was then the wealthiest Bishopric in England, so there's no doubt Foxe was a very powerful man. Even today, the Lord Privy Seal is automatically given a place in the Cabinet of any British Government.
- 75) To understand what a vast sum £5 was at this time, consider the funeral accounts of Anne Fortesque, an Oxfordshire noblewoman who died in 1518. Her elaborate funeral cost a total of only £39. The catering budget accounted for just over £10 of this, but still provided plenty of food and drink for all the 300 mourners attending.

### **Chapter 10: The Southwark Mysteries**

- 76) *Sunday Telegraph*, May 14, 2000.
- 77) Southwark Mysteries website.

### **Chapter 11: Bardic Bankside**

- 78) *A Notable Discovery of Cozenage*, by Robert Greene (1591). An added refinement to crossbiting today is that the pimp starts taking cellphone photographs the moment he walks in and threatens to distribute them on the internet.
- 79) A jaxe of course (more usually spelt "jacks" or "jakes") is a lavatory, so the clergyman here was echoing Thomas Aquinas' 13<sup>th</sup> century remark about the palace cesspool.
- 80) *London: The Biography*, by Peter Ackroyd (Vintage, 2001). Ackroyd's view – and I think it's right – is that this attitude towards Southwark didn't change till the Jubilee Line extension became necessary in the late 1980s.
- 81) Published in *Holinshed's Chronicles*, 1577.
- 82) "From the late 16<sup>th</sup> century onwards, a growing number of parish overseers' accounts record disbursements for poor people's burials, especially the shroud and the grave," Houlbrooke writes. Coffins were seldom used for ordinary burials until about 1650. Until then, poorer

people would simply be buried in a shroud or winding-sheet.

- 83) Thomas Platten, a Swiss traveller describing his visit to London in 1599, writes that he found whores swarming around every tavern and playhouse in the city, as well as several child brothels in which girls aged from seven to 14 were supplied. He doesn't say where in London these brothels were, but every other taste was catered for on Bankside so I've no doubt this one was too.
- 84) I've only been to Tijuana once and even then it was just a day-trip from San Diego. The coach driver told us he'd taken another tourist group down there a few months earlier, but that one guy had failed to appear back at the bus for the return journey. They waited as long as they could, but eventually had to go back across the border without him. Two weeks later, this same driver was waiting at the Tijuana pick-up point again when the missing tourist staggered up. He'd lost his wallet and one of his shoes, his clothes were all over the place and he hadn't slept in days. Quite how the details were worked out at US immigration, I don't know, but they managed to get him back home in the end – where he faced a rather awkward interview with his wife.
- 85) There's a 1992 episode of *The Simpsons* where Krusty the Clown refers to Tijuana as "the happiest place on Earth". Krusty would have loved Shakespeare's Bankside.
- 86) *Shakespeare's Restless World: Swordplay & Swagger* (Radio 4, April 2012). Still available on the BBC iPlayer [here](#).
- 87) After this tour-de-force explanation from Dark, I offered my own summing-up: "So it's *Boardwalk Empire* meets *Deadwood* with a touch of *Breaking Bad*?" She laughed. "Yes, exactly - plus bears!"
- 88) I've told this story a little more fully elsewhere in the piece. Depending which version you're reading, you'll find it as either a piece of box copy or an appendix.
- 89) Leslie Hotson's 1931 book *Shakespeare vs. Swallow* describes William Gardiner's life as one of "greed, usury, fraud, cruelty and perjury". I think it's safe to assume from this that he was related to the gangster clan of Gardiners involved in running so many Bankside brothels.
- 90) Shakespeare originally named his Falstaff character Sir John Oldcastle, perhaps with the idea of teasing the real Oldcastle's descendent Lord Cobham. Oldcastle was actually a protestant martyr of very sober habits, so Lord Cobham was not amused. He insisted that Shakespeare change the character's name, backed that demand up with various threats and duly got his way. The playwright was sufficiently shaken by this to add a disclaimer about Falstaff in his epilogue for *Henry IV pt 2*. "Oldcastle died a martyr and this is not the man," he has the play's final speaker say.
- 91) The remark about honour, of course, is Falstaff's own. It appears in *Henry IV, pt 1*.
- 92) *The Annals of London*, compiled by John Richardson (Cassell & Co, 2000).
- 93) *Henry VI, pt 1: Act 1, scene 3*.
- 94) *Troilus & Cressida; Act 5, scene 10*. *Cassell's Dictionary of Slang* cites a similar usage in 17<sup>th</sup> century popular speech: "No goose bit so sore as Bess Broughton's". Broughton was London's most famous whore at that time.

## Chapter 12: Going underground

- 95) *Altered State: The Story of Ecstasy Culture & Acid House*, by Matthew Collin (Serpent's Tail, 1997).
- 96) *The Cross Bones Burial Ground, Redcross Way, Southwark, London: Archaeological Excavations (1991-1998)*, by Megan Brickley, Adrian Miles and Hilary Stainer (Museum of London, 1999).
- 97) There had been warehouses occupying the footprint's ground until the 1980s and the MoL found foundations for these buildings as they dug. The builders who'd put those warehouse up had stacked the bones they disturbed neatly into the construction trenches lining the foundations' walls.
- 98) *History Cold Case: Crossbones Girl* (BBC 2, first aired May 2010).
- 99) The idea of Christ rising in the east seems to be a mixture of sunrise symbolism and the fact that Jerusalem lies to the east of Britain. For corpses in the third or fourth layer down at Cross Bones, their first experience of resurrection would presumably be banging their head on the coffin above.
- 100) I'm using our modern understanding of the word "children" here as referring to anyone under 18 years of age. Infant burials in St Saviour's Parish spiked every summer, as the hot weather made children more susceptible to dysentery. The detailed figures appear in the MoL's full report [here](#).

- 101) Ken Campbell was, in the words of Ian Shuttleworth, “one of Britain’s premier theatrical fruitcakes”. In addition to staging *The Warp*’s first production and a Pidgin English *Macbeth*, he toured his own one-man shows on the history of ventriloquism and all kinds of Forteania. When Campbell died in 2008, Constable ensured he got a ribbon of his own on Cross Bones’ gates. For more on *The Warp*, see Ian Shuttleworth’s site here: <http://www.cix.co.uk/~shutters/warp.htm>
- 102) I was once lucky enough to spend a day with Campbell, but that story would require a whole essay of its own. My favourite anecdote about him concerns the Pidgin *Macbeth* he staged at London’s Piccadilly Theatre in 1999. Lady Macbeth’s, “Come you spirits that tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here” became, “Satan, takem me handbag”.

### Chapter 13: Puritans & plagues

- 103) *Old Southwark & Its People*, by William Rendle (W Drewett, 1878).
- 104) The terms “Redcross Way”, “Redcross Alley” and “Redcross Court” were used interchangeably by the people living there in the 1800s. It’s clear from context that they have the same street in mind whichever name they give it.
- 105) John Stow’s *Survey of London* (1598).
- 106) By “excluded from Christian burial” here, I think Stow must mean they were buried in unconsecrated ground. Since the Reformation of the 1530s, that issue was irrelevant in the church’s official doctrine, but it may still have mattered to the common folk. See the relevant box copy/appendix for further discussion of this point.
- 107) Houlbrooke thinks only an official condemnation by the Church would be enough to bar a woman from parish burial. “I think that only a known formal sentence of excommunication (in theory quite possible for a notorious prostitute) would have been sufficient to deny her churchyard burial,” he told me. Other stewhouse girls may have finished up at Cross Bones simply because they required a pauper burial.
- 108) *Histories and Antiquities of the Parish of St Saviour’s Southwark*, by Matthew Concanen & Aaron Morgan (1795). Concanen was a poet, essayist and political pamphleteer who also spent 16 years as Jamaica’s attorney general. His mischievous 1728 piece *An Essay Against Too Much Reading* was the first published article to claim Shakespeare hadn’t written his own plays.
- 109) The MoL has found evidence of seven burial grounds in St Saviour’s Parish altogether, only three of which were used by the parish authorities. The three parish grounds were St Saviour’s own churchyard, the College Churchyard in Park Street (used by St Saviour’s Almshouse) and Cross Bones (the parish poor ground). The other four sites were Deadman’s Place (used first as a plague pit then by the adjacent Independent Chapel), the Baptist burial ground in Bandy Leg Walk (now part of Southwark Bridge Road) and two Quaker grounds (one on Ewer Street, the other on O’Meara Street).
- 110) John Aubrey (1626-1697) is best known as the author of *Brief Lives*. The dung wharf he mentions loaded cemetery bones on to waiting barges. These bones would later be ground into a phosphorous-rich power for use as agricultural fertiliser.
- 111) Boulton also quotes the accounts from Richard Bird, a Southwark vintner, whose family spent 15 shillings and twopence to bury him in 1626. This broke down to ten shillings and twopence for the ground, the funeral cloth and tolling of the church bell, three shillings paid to the minister, clerk and sexton (between them), fourpence each to the bearers and eightpence for the gravedigger. This would have been a relatively grand funeral by Southwark’s standards at the time and far beyond what most people living there could expect.
- 112) Once coffins became obligatory for even pauper burials in around 1650, some parishes experimented with a re-usable model. This had a hinged underside which allowed the body to be dropped discretely into the grave without burying the coffin too. This was thought to be a step too far, however and the practice was quickly abandoned.
- 113) The Clink Liberty’s special status was briefly renewed under both Charles I and Charles II. I get the impression this was done purely as a courtesy to the Bishop of Winchester, however and that real power over the Liberty’s affairs remained outside his hands.
- 114) I checked with Patricia Dark to see exactly what geographical area these Bills of Mortality covered. “The city of London, the city of Westminster and the borough of Southwark were included in the Bills of Mortality, along with the parishes of Lambeth, Rotherhithe, Newington and Bermondsey,” she told me. That means that the whole area covered by the

modern boroughs of both Southwark and Bermondsey would have been counted in the Bills' 1665 plague deaths.

- 115) Muddiman also tells the story of a Newgate butcher declared dead of plague by the parish corpse collectors, but left laid out in his room overnight because their cart was already full. Next morning, the butcher's daughter went into that room and was startled to hear her father beckon her over to ask for a glass of ale. "The man took a pipe of tobacco, ate a rabbit and on Sunday went to church to give God thanks for his preservation," Muddiman writes. Many families preferred to keep their deceased laid out at home for a few days to guard against just this possibility, a practice which added still further to infection rates.
- 116) In the case of private burials, even quite wealthy families might delay interment by as much as two weeks. Houlbrooke quotes the instructions given to Dorothy Wood's coffin-maker in 1704: "Be pleased to take care of the inside, for the Gentlewoman is not design'd to be buried this fortnight". The writer is asking for the coffin's interior joints to be pitch-sealed with particular care to minimise any escaping smell.
- 117) Some of the Bankside girls opted for a trip to America, where they were sorely needed by the male settlers who'd followed the Mayflower's 1620 voyage there. "The great majority were enabled to start new lives, get married and become the mothers of many respected daughters of the American Revolution," Burford writes.

#### Chapter 14: Crossbones Girl

- 118) The MoL's archaeologists found this particular skeleton in a cheap, ramshackle coffin less than three feet below the surface. Other coffins were packed just an inch or two away on all sides, with eight or nine more layers stacked beneath.
- 119) Green's original report for the BBC contains a lot of information that never made it into the finished programme. That's where most of his quotes come from here.
- 120) The camera caught Black as she studied the skull's accumulation of distorted syphilitic bone. "That's just horrendous," she murmured. "That must have been so painful."
- 121) This is a belief still held in some parts of Africa, where it's held to be a cure for Aids. "You have huge HIV numbers and nobody is educated on how you get HIV," the actress and campaigner Charlize Theron said of her native South Africa in 2009. "Many think if they rape a child or virgin they will be cured of the disease." The 2011 Broadway musical *The Book of Mormon* mocks this superstition with an African character called Middala, who has to be talked out of finding a baby to pursue his own treatment.
- 122) The best you could hope for from mercury treatment was that it would slow the progress of your syphilis. It certainly didn't offer a cure and its side effects were hideous: vomiting, hair loss, amnesia, depression and extreme tooth decay. The programme compared it to chemotherapy today – a debilitating treatment people used only because there was nothing else.

#### Chapter 15: The Stink Industries

- 123) In 1757, Samuel Derrick compiled and published the first edition of *Harris's List of Covent Garden Ladies*, a highly explicit consumer's guide to the prices and specialities of the many working girls who kept rooms there. It was this area between Seven Dials and The Strand which formed the centre of Georgian London's sex trade now, entering the language in slang phrases like "a Covent Garden nun" (for whore) and "Covent Garden gout" (meaning a dose of the pox). Modern reprints of *Harris's List* are available today and it makes an entertaining read.
- 124) The new factories also stretched into neighbouring Lambeth, where one 18<sup>th</sup> century press report claimed a local gang had been digging up bodies from the graveyards to harvest their fat for candles, their bones for alkali and their flesh for dog meat. As Peter Ackroyd points out, this report is both lurid enough and vague enough to suggest the story's apocryphal, but it does provide a chilling prophesy of the real grave-robbers who'd later target Cross Bones itself.
- 125) St Saviour's signed a lease for Cross Bones under the parish's own name in 1820 and finally acquired freehold of the site in 1863. That was the year the Bishop of Winchester's remaining rights over the Clink Liberty passed to the Church of England's Ecclesiastical Commissioners, which is what made the transfer of freehold possible.
- 126) Jones and Harwood, which I've written about [here](#), is just one example.
- 127) *England's Mistress: The Infamous Life of Emma Hamilton*, by Kate Williams (Hutchinson, 2006).

- 128) That's certainly the view taken by Niki Adams, a spokeswoman for the English Collective of Prostitutes, who I happened to hear speaking on the radio while preparing this piece. "With benefit cuts, increased homelessness and increased unemployment, many women, particularly mothers are going into prostitution and find that it's a better choice than other choices available at the moment," she said. "Why is it more degrading to work in the sex industry than skipping meals to feed our children, begging on the streets or working in low-wage jobs?" (*Today*, BBC Radio 4, December 4, 2012).

### Chapter 16: Say my name

- 129) It was not necessarily the pauper's place of death that decided which parish must pay for her funeral, but rather her place of settlement. A St Saviour's pauper who happened to die while visiting St Olave's Parish, for example, would still have been St Saviour's responsibility to bury. I'll return to this point in a moment.
- 130) Each parish kept its own burial register, but these do not distinguish between the individual burial grounds the parish had at its disposal. St Saviour's, for example, used three different burial grounds within the parish boundaries, of which Cross Bones was only one.
- 131) Green doesn't mention it in the programme, but the camera's shot of this entry shows the additional words "...and pleuritis". That's the lung inflammation we'd today call pleurisy.
- 132) Forefathers, a poster on the [Rootschat board](#), found a girl called Elizabeth Mitchell in the census book of 1851. She's listed as 21 years old, head of a household in Mint Street (just round the corner from Cross Bones) and gives her trade as shoebinder. The census taker notes her place of birth as Portsmouth in Hampshire and adds a tick against her name in the column marked "Whether born blind or deaf and dumb". We know that year's census data was gathered five months before the BBC's Elizabeth Mitchell died and the age given is within a reasonable margin of error. Are they both the same woman? Perhaps.
- 133) I sent Green my query at 4:08 one afternoon and his reply arrived at 4:18. Two-and-a-half years had then passed since *Crossbones Girl* was first aired and I got the impression he'd been waiting for someone to ask this question ever since.
- 134) We shouldn't assume that the deceased's family accepted a pauper burial lightly either. George Downing, the secretary of one burial society, said in 1843 that poor people would sooner "sell their beds from under them" than subject loved ones to a pauper funeral. "It is heart-rending to them," he adds.
- 135) "It's a cruel disfigurement, because preferentially it wants to go to your face," Black added. "It [creates] the kind of face that children would cry at – and that's quite sad for someone who's so very young."
- 136) You can buy a copy of *Crossbones Girl* for just £1.89 in the iTunes store. I do urge you to see it for yourself, because it's a fascinating detective story and I've only scratched the surface of its content here.

### Chapter 17: Resurrection men

- 137) However unsavoury this practice sounds to modern ears, we must remember that it laid the groundwork for every surgical procedure saving lives today.
- 138) William Osler was chief physician at Johns Hopkins in Baltimore and the visitor writing here was his uncle. Rectified oil of turpentine was known as "ol. Terebinth" at the time and seems to have been employed here as a disinfectant.
- 139) *Poet-Physician: Keats & Medical Science*, by Donald Goellnicht (University of Pittsburgh Press, 1984).
- 140) "Once Keats got used to the stink, maggots and livid colours of decaying flesh, no doubt he joined in the robust jokes that steadied them in their work," writes the poet's biographer Nicholas Roe. Distancing yourself in this way must surely be a necessary part of mastering such work.
- 141) Orme's comments here come from our exchange of e-mails in November 2012.
- 142) By 1822, people's fears about grave-robbing had become so great that undertakers started supplying metal coffins to those who could afford them. The extra weight of these coffins increased costs for every other aspect of the burial too and an 1822 St Saviour's price list shows such burials charged at over £12 for adults and nearly £10 for children. The result was to ensure metal coffins could be used only by the rich and hence left the poor more vulnerable than ever. If you could afford a metal coffin, you could afford a better burial ground than Cross Bones too, so I doubt they ever troubled the grave-robbers working there.

- 143) *The Corpse King*, by Dorothy Davies (2007) is available on [Authorsden.com](http://Authorsden.com).
- 144) *The Bodysnatcher's Apprentice*, by David Orme (Kindle, 2012).
- 145) *Report From The House of Commons Select Committee on Anatomy, 1828* (available as a free Goggle e-book, starting from page 14 [here](#)). The four resurrectionists who spoke before this committee were given immunity in return for their co-operation.
- 146) *The Diary of a Resurrectionist, 1811-1812*, edited and commented upon by James Blake Bailey (Rarebooks.com, 2012).
- 147) The fact that the gang who shopped Brookes did so at Union Street police station (which is just around the corner from Cross Bones) suggests the undertaker was sited on that station's patch. It's possible that the corpse was destined for Cross Bones when stolen and still ended up there after its recovery. One St Saviour's undertaker produced an 1838 price list showing he charged one pound, five shillings and eightpence to bury an adult at Cross Bones, (equivalent to about £120 today), so the bribe must have been a lot more than that for our man to consider it worth the risk.
- 148) It saved the resurrectionists a lot of work when they could steal a body before its burial instead of having to dig it up later, so they often recruited accomplices like the undertaker here. Corrupt workhouse officials would fiddle the paperwork to make deaths in their own establishment disappear, then have the resurrectionist collect those bodies overnight.
- 149) By 1811, Crouch had gotten so used to throwing his weight around that he actually called the Borough Boys out on strike, demanding still higher prices for the bodies they supplied. The surgeons managed to tough-out this dispute by employing amateur body-snatchers instead, forcing Crouch and his men to resume work at their old rates. Many surgeons who'd dealt with the "scabs" during Crouch's strike later suffered the sort of revenge break-ins described in the main piece.
- 150) Sir Astley also pressurised Guy's Hospital into giving his incompetent nephew Bransby Cooper a surgeon's job there. In March 1828, *The Lancet* published a scathing account of a botched operation by Bransby which lasted over an hour and killed a patient whose life had not previously been in danger. "Not only did Cooper lose his way anatomically, he lost his head," *The Lancet* says. "His panicky use of instruments and his barked and desperate orders to his assistants were observed by a number of his surgical colleagues."
- 151) Body-snatching is not just a historical phenomenon. The April 2, 2012 issue of *The Economist* describes a 3,000 year old Chinese custom called ghost marriage, still practiced in rural areas today. Families whose loved one dies unbetrothed buy another family's corpse of the opposite sex – often spending many years' income on this - then bury the two bodies together in a shared grave with a ceremony combining both funeral and marriage rites. "In Hebei province in February this year, an 18-year old man surnamed Lui, who died of heart disease, was joined in a ghost marriage with a 17-year-old woman named Wu," the magazine reports. "Their honeymoon was cut short soon after, however, when grave-robbers snatched Ms Wu's body, reselling her into another ghost marriage in a neighbouring province."

## Chapter 18: John Crow's megaphone

- 152) Or are you? Perhaps Rivlin's ruling means the undertaker's embalming work could be held to transform a body into property too. Details of Kelly's trial and conviction appear on the BBC News website [here](#) and [here](#).
- 153) Piccadilly Circus – or just "the 'Dilly" as it's called here - is a central London area where prostitutes and rent boys have traditionally gathered. "The 'Dilly" later became a general term for any such street in police and criminal slang.
- 154) I love this little verse for the way it condenses the girl's childhood, sexual awakening, working life and death into the passage of a single week. But Walsh may be pulling our legs when he labels it "old rhyme, c. 1880". *Cassell's Dictionary of Slang* dates "working girl" as a term for prostitute no earlier than the 1930s and as far as I've been able to discover, "lipstick" in the sense used here first appeared about 1920. If both these terms really were around in 1880, then the lexicographers have some re-writing to do.
- 155) Jimmy Cauty (aka Rockman Rock) is not only a musician, but also a witty and imaginative arts prankster. [This vimeo film](#) gives a pretty good primer on his antics to date.
- 156) As far as I know, Banksy's never responded to this invitation. As we've seen with the recent auction sales of his graffiti pieces (many of which have been chipped from the owner's walls under somewhat dubious circumstances), his prices have now risen to a point where any Cross Bones tarmac he decorated might well be worth removing intact for sale by the

developers. It could even end up adding to their profits from the site.

## Chapter 19: Seeking closure

- 157) The minimum depth officially then allowed for burials at Cross Bones was four feet, or twice the minimum depth actually used. In patches where it was possible to dig much deeper, the sexton Mr Drewett explained, he buried the first coffin as deep as 16 feet, stacking later ones on top in the underground towers MoL archaeologists would later find there. "My system has invariably been to go to 14 or 16 feet where an opportunity offered, without respect to pay," Drewett wanted the vestry to understand. "The same has been done with parish and workhouse funerals, where I had no prospect of remuneration whatsoever."
- 158) In fairness to St Saviour's churchwardens, it was their responsibility to find *somewhere* in the parish where the huge influx of cholera victims could be buried. Quick as the vestry's critics were to condemn the state of Cross Bones, I doubt they offered much of an alternative.
- 159) You'd be in no hurry to empty an under-floor cesspool like the ones mentioned here, but the task had to be faced eventually. This was done using buckets carried in and out through the house, with all the casual spillage that implies.
- 160) Sir Edwin Chadwick, secretary of the Poor Law Commission, produced his report from this enquiry in 1843. You can find Wyld's contribution extracted in the *Provincial Medical Journal* of January 13, 1844.
- 161) Take note of that "18 inches". Now even the two-foot minimum depth considered inadequate back in 1832 could no longer be maintained.
- 162) *Gatherings From Graveyards*, by George Alfred Walker (Longman, 1839). Available as a free Google e-book [here](#).
- 163) These 20,000 coffins stacked nine deep would make 2,222 "towers" altogether. Equally spaced in an acre's 4,840 square yards, each stack would get just over two square yards of surface area to itself. The depth would be even tighter, with each coffin given just 16 inches of the 12-foot hole Haycock mentions. It's a squeeze but, in an age when Londoners were rather smaller than they are today, just about possible. Photographs from the MoL's 1993 Cross Bones dig suggest a very similar density was achieved there.
- 164) This made me think of Christopher Hitchens describing the bloodstained dirt he found blowing into his own lungs as he stood next to an Iraqi mass grave in July 2003. "I hope never again to feel so utterly befouled," he writes in 2010's *Hitch-22*. "It was in the nostrils, in the eyes ... on the tongue and in the *mouth*."
- 165) Thomas Hardy caught the flavour of this bone house slop well in his 1882 poem *The Levelled Churchyard*: "We late-lamented, resting here / Are mixed to human jam / And each to each exclaims in fear / 'I know not which I am'."
- 166) *A Microscopical Examination of the Water Supplied to the Inhabitants of London and the Suburban Districts*, by Arthur Hill Hassall (Samuel Highley, 1850).
- 167) The result of S&V's inaction was that, when cholera struck London again in 1854, Southwark once again showed the highest mortality in the city. That was also the year in which John Snow's epidemiology study of the neighbourhood served by a Soho water pump proved that cholera is primarily spread by dirty drinking water.
- 168) George Cruikshank, who illustrated many of Dickens' books, produced a scathing 1832 cartoon on the state of Southwark's drinking water. You can see it on the UCLA website [here](#).
- 169) The shells Gwilt mentions here were flimsy wooden containers used to transport a body before a real coffin could be found. Victorians used them rather as we use body bags today.
- 170) Like many Victorian letter-writers, Mrs Gwilt had a very verbose style. For the sake of both clarity and impact, I've made a lot of small cuts to her letter while transcribing it here, but you can find the full text in the MoL's Cross Bones report (see note 96). The same goes for Lord Brabazon's letter below.
- 171) If anything, St Saviour's claimed, they'd gone above and beyond the call of duty with Shooter's remains. The parish chaplain had refused to wait any longer for the delayed coroner's warrant and buried the body anyway, thus "rendering himself liable to a penalty for doing so".
- 172) St Saviour's letter lists all the individuals involved here, giving us a reliable list of at least six people we can be sure were buried at Cross Bones. They were: Elizabeth Frances Lock (aged 4), died July 23, 1849 and buried next day; Harriet Horton and Mary Ann Priest

(ages unknown), both taken to the dead house on July 24 and buried next day; Michael Leary (aged 8), died August 2 and buried next day; Mary Evans (aged 68), died August 6 and buried next day; Walter Cook (aged 14), found dead in the river on August 10 and buried next day. The seventh name mentioned is Charles Shooter (age unknown), the Blackfriars Bridge suicide, who was found dead in the river on July 22. St Saviour's would say only that he was buried "in one of the cemeteries" on July 25.

- 173) In transcribing Mrs Gwilt's letter, I've cut out one claim altogether. The cholera woman, she says, "actually broke a blood vessel trying to get out [of her coffin shell] whilst being carried along, she not being dead then". That smells like an urban myth to me and St Saviour's replied the tale was "entirely erroneous, no such thing ever having occurred".
- 174) *The London Gazette*, launched in 1665, is the British Government's official journal of record. Its role is to print all manner of official government announcements to ensure they're available somewhere in the public record. It carried many warnings to overcrowded city graveyards at about this time.
- 175) It's at this point that any remaining sympathy I had for St Saviour's evaporates. Spending parish money on expensive legal advice to combat the Board of Health smacks more of hubris than any genuine concern for the people round Redcross Way.
- 176) Mariane Gwilt's husband George is among this letter's signatories. He was an architect, who drew up some plans of Cross Bones in 1821.
- 177) A year after Sutherland's report, St Saviour's was still showing some of the highest cholera deaths in London. Statistics published in *The Times* of November 9, 1853, show St Saviour's then accounted for 12% of all the cholera deaths in London and 20% of those south of the river.
- 178) Sydenham lies south of Southwark in the neighbouring borough of Lewisham.
- 179) The whole of London had a burial crisis on its hands at this time, which spawned a lot of private cemetery companies hoping to profit by making new land available. The London Necropolis Company, which I've written about elsewhere on PlanetSlade, ran corpse trains out of London's Waterloo Station to a new cemetery at Woking in Surrey.
- 180) Brabazon was chairman of London's Metropolitan Public Garden, Playground & Boulevard Association. His two letters appeared in *The Times* on November 10, 1883 and December 22, 1883, respectively.

## Chapter 20: What happens next?

- 181) You can find the ad on Deloitte's website [here](#).
- 182) *Financial Times*, November 9, 2012.
- 183) Student (his professional name) was speaking for the International Union of Sex Workers

## Appendices

- 184) St Saviour's parish workhouse was in Mint Street, which lies just 300 yards from Cross Bones. This area was "surrounded with every possible nuisance, physical and moral," *The Lancet* wrote in 1865.
- 185) Posting in response to a 2008 Cross Bones video on YouTube, an archaeologist using the name Kuniklos reported finding a monastery well containing the bones of newborn babies. The team's conclusion was that mothers whose illegitimate babies had died without baptism used the well to "bury" their bodies. "The well was on abbey property, so it's as close as the little ones would get to a proper burial," Kuniklos says.
- 186) In his 1926 book *Funeral Customs*, Bernard Puckle confirms that unbaptised children could be refused burial in a consecrated churchyard. "It often happened that the body would be secretly buried in the night within the coveted spot which, if discovered, brought further penalties upon the offender," he adds.
- 187) Exchange of e-mails, November/December 2012. Boulton added that fully half of Newcastle's burials in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries took place in the city's unconsecrated Ballast Hills graveyard for reasons of cost.
- 188) There's a scene in Charles Dickens' *Bleak House* where Lady Dedlock and Jo, a young crossing guard, visit a ramshackle pauper graveyard much like Cross Bones. When Lady Dedlock asks Jo if the ground is "blessed", he replies: "Blest? It ain't done much good if it is. Blest? I should think it was t'othered myself."
- 189) In 1617, Bankside stewholders complained that innkeepers in the High Street had blocked



- an old alleyway which previously gave their customers a convenient short-cut to the riverside brothels. The court ruled they'd been trying make lazy punters spend money in the High Street's own warehouses instead.
- 190) The British Museum's print room has a Bill Crook engraving showing this row of stewhouses as it appeared in 1547. He's helpfully labeled each one with its name and identifying symbol.
- 191) This joint gave its name to Rose Street in Southwark, which survives as Rose Alley today. "Plucking a rose" became an Elizabethan euphemism for sex, probably because that street was so packed with whores.
- 192) Exchange of e-mails, August 2013.
- 193) At the other end of the spectrum were Southwark's cheapest, no-frills warehouses. "In the lowest class of brothel, there would be no entertainment but plenty of liquor and the girls worked till they dropped," Burford writes.
- 194) *The Picara: From Hera to Fantasy Heroine*, by Anne Kaler (Popular Press, 1991).
- 195) "Under James' benevolent if drunken eyes, the Bankside amusement park flourished as never before," Burford writes.
- 196) Early forms of condom were available in England in the 1600s, but they never caught on in the Bankside brothels. Throughout the stewhouse era, Bankside's girls relied on little more than a good hard piss and a wipe-cloth soaked in wine or vinegar to protect them from pregnancy and VD alike.
- 197) The Pope saw such marriages as a way for honest men to redeem former whores.
- 198) Cross Bones lies in the stretch of Redcross Way between Southwark Street and Union Street, with the Boot & Flogger pub (10-20 Redcross Way) directly opposite its gates. Houses numbered 1-9 Redcross Way are just on the other side of Southwark Street, less than 150 yards from the burial ground itself.
- 199) Old Bailey [trial transcripts](#): January 29, 1838.
- 200) Child witnesses like Grant (who'd never learnt to read) would take their oath in the Victorian courts by reciting *The Lord's Prayer* from memory. This was felt to show they knew the difference between right and wrong and so would not casually lie about what they'd seen. Grant had failed to clear this hurdle at the coroner's hearing, but a priest taught him the prayer in time for him to testify at the Old Bailey.
- 201) Human teeth at this time could be sold to dentists, who assembled them into sets of dentures for their customers. These sets were later nicknamed Waterloo teeth, because so many of them came from the casualties of that 1815 battle.
- 202) Fifty guineas in 1815 would be worth about £4,000 today.
- 203) A gentleman's gentleman was a rich man's personal valet – precisely the job Jeeves held with Bertie Wooster. What on Earth must Light have been like in that role?
- 204) We can get an idea of the living conditions at Redcross Way in Lofthouse's time from DrWot's [YouTube interview](#) with Joyce Newman, whose mother was born there in 1895. "It was old-fashioned buildings, with just one wash-house on the landing for three or four blocks and they were about five stories high," she says. "They were terrible places."
- 205) Lofthouse was Alice's married name, taken from her estranged husband, the soldier William Lofthouse. Some reports of the case call her Alice Fisher, which I assume was her maiden name. She was still married to William Lofthouse when she died.
- 206) Old Bailey [trial transcripts](#): September 13, 1898. *The Sun*, July 18, 1898.
- 207) *Daily Mail*, July 20, 1898.
- 208) "Fatty" was William Gould's nickname.
- 209) *Daily Mail*, July 27, 1898.
- 210) *Curing Hooliganism: Moral Panic, Juvenile Delinquency & The Political Nature of Moral Reform in Britain 1898-1908*, by Ian Livie (University of Southern California Phd dissertation, May 2010).
- 211) Burke's 20 shilling fine would translate to about £110 today.
- 212) *South London Chronicle*, July 23, 1898.
- 213) Page, Burke and O'Connell may well have been tied up in the gang's activities too, either as whores of simple hangers-on.