

13. medieval & tudor london

The period between the Norman Conquest of 1066 and the death of Queen Elizabeth I in 1603 was one of great change for London. The first stirrings of the society we recognise today began to take shape, and literature, law and the Anglican Church started to exert their influence on the way Londoners lived. But for all the advances in technology and learning, this was still a semi-lawless city – a place in which the areas outside the old Roman walls were given over to brothels, bear-baiting and grisly executions; all medieval and Tudor Londoners' idea of a good day out. Though the Great Fire of 1666 destroyed much of the capital those people would have known, the city still reveals tantalising glimpses of their world.



Start point: Farringdon tube
End point: Chancery Lane tube
Duration: 4 hours

- Come out of **Farringdon tube** and turn left down Cowcross Street. Walk straight through the market to emerge in Smithfield – home to the stunning Tudor gatehouse of St Bartholomew the Great. In medieval times, this open space lay just beyond the city walls, which meant it was not subject to the same laws as the boroughs within. Not only was Smithfield the venue for the annual Bartholomew Fair – a cloth market that grew to become a riotous pleasure zone of sideshows, acrobats, freaks and music – between 1133 and 1855, but it also was a notorious execution site. Hundreds were burnt at the stake here.
- Death and Smithfield seemed to go hand in hand throughout the medieval and Tudor era. When the Black Death carried off around a third of London's population in 1348-49, many of the dead were buried in a mass grave here. And it was to this space that Wat Tyler and his army of 20,000 peasants marched in 1381 to negotiate with King Richard II over unpopular taxes. The Peasants' Revolt was brought to an abrupt end, though, when Tyler was murdered in front of the crowd by the Lord Mayor of London.
- Head to the far right-hand corner of Smithfield and walk down Giltspur Street. Like Smithfield, **Cock Lane** – on the right – wasn't subject to City laws. Known as Cokkes Lane in medieval times, it was where London's legalised brothels were to be found. It had a sordid reputation. Any woman

convicted of prostitution within the city walls was marched through Cheapside and Newgate in a striped cap to guarded lodgings on this street.

- Retrace your steps to Smithfield and turn right into the alley between the Tudor gatehouse and St Bartholomew's Hospital. Carry on along Little Britain, then turn left at Montague Street and catch the eastbound **100** from the **Little Britain** stop. This bus then heads along **Houndsditch** – so named because this former moat around the city wall was where Londoners would dump their dead animals.
- Get off the bus at the **Tower Hill/Tower Gateway** stop, walk back up Mansell Street and turn left onto Shorter Street. This takes you to the **Tower of London**, which is where England's first Norman king William the Conqueror built a fortress to keep an eye on his new subjects. William's White Tower was built in 1078, and the complex was further extended in the 12th and 13th centuries. It served as both a royal residence and – most infamously – a prison. Henry VIII's wives Anne Boleyn and Catherine Howard were both beheaded within its grounds, while many other important figures – including Thomas More and Cromwell – were executed at **Tower Hill**, just outside its walls.
- Walk back to the junction of Tower Hill and Minories, and turn left. Catch the westbound **RV1** from the **Tower Gateway** stop and take it all the way to the **Hop Exchange** stop by Borough Market. When you get off the bus, walk back up Southwark Street and turn right down Borough High Street. At the junction, cross the road and turn left. **Talbot Yard**, on the right, was where The Tabard Inn – the

pub in which Chaucer's pilgrims gather in *The Canterbury Tales* – was situated between 1307 and 1873.

● Return to the Hop Exchange stop and continue walking down Southwark Street, then turn left down Redcross Way. The gates on the left – the bars of which are hung with ribbons, tinsel, plastic flowers and scraps of poetry – are a rudimentary shrine that marks the entrance to what was **Crossbones Graveyard** – a 16th-century unconsecrated cemetery for 'single women', a Tudor euphemism for prostitutes. This is where many of the Winchester Geese – women who worked in brothels licensed by the Bishop of Winchester – were buried outside of church ceremony. The bishop oversaw a semi-lawless state known as The Liberty of the Clink, which sat outside both the City of London and the County of Surrey, and the district was known in medieval and Tudor times as a place of prostitution, theatre and bear-baiting – all forbidden on the other side of the river.

● Return once more to the **Hop Exchange** stop and catch the westbound **BV1**. This runs parallel to Bankside, where a recreation of Shakespeare's Globe Theatre stands close to where bear- and bull-baiting arenas existed in the Tudor era. A street called Bear Gardens, just west of Southwark Bridge, is a reminder of how the area was once synonymous with this bloody form of entertainment.

● Get off the bus at the **Waterloo Station/York Road** stop and catch the westbound **77** from the identically named stop a little further down the road. Get off the bus at **Lambeth Palace**. Still the official residence of the Archbishop of Canterbury, this palace has been the Primate's home since the 1200s and features some fine medieval and Tudor architecture. Its brick gatehouse, for example, dates from 1495. It was from here that Archbishop Thomas Cranmer and Henry VIII's right-hand man Thomas Cromwell orchestrated the Reformation in the early 16th century.

● Continue down Lambeth Palace Road and turn left at the roundabout into Lambeth Road. Catch the northbound **3** from the **Lambeth Palace** stop, and take it across the bridge to the **Parliament Square** stop on Whitehall. As you approach Parliament Square, look to the left for the 14th-century **Jewel Tower, Westminster Abbey**, just behind, is one of the largest and most famous Gothic buildings in the world. The present building was constructed from 1245. All British monarchs, from Harold and William I in 1066 to Queen Elizabeth II in 1953 have been crowned here. And many medieval and Tudor royals – including Anne of Cleves and Elizabeth I – are buried inside.

● Catch the eastbound **11** from the same bus stop. As the bus goes along **Fleet Street**, look to the right for the **Inner Temple Gateway**, which is believed to have been here since the 12th century – though the current gate is a 17th century reproduction. **Prince**

Henry's Room, the half-timbered Tudor house that stands over the gate, was one of the few secular buildings to be spared by the Great Fire of London in 1666.

● Get off the bus at **Bank Station/Threadneedle Street**, walk back down Threadneedle Street, turn hard left into Cornhill and catch the westbound **25** from the **Bank Station/Cornhill** stop. This heads along Cheapside – the City's market place in the medieval times. On the left immediately after Old Jewry (the medieval Jewish ghetto) was where the wonderfully named Gropecunt Alley was located. It was flanked by Puppekirty ('poke skirt') Lane and Bordhavelane (bordello lane), which suggests this was once a miniature red-light district.

● Once you've passed the former Newgate Prison on the corner of Old Bailey, get off the bus at the **Holborn Circus/Fetter Lane** stop. Cross to the other side of High Holborn and turn right, then turn left into Hatton Garden. Finish your journey with a drink in Ye Olde Mitre – reached by turning down an alleyway on the right. Established in the 1500s, the pub is a suitably historical place in which to toast your medieval and Tudor forebears. Though its interiors are more Victorian than Elizabethan, the Virgin Queen is said to have once danced around the cherry tree that now supports the front of the building.

