

PART I

East India House

A giant order of Doric pilasters under an academically correct frieze of triglyphs demonstrated the East India Company's soundness and seriousness of purpose: the Directors' "aim was resolutely down to earth – to inspire confidence and impress the shareholders."

David Morier Evans

The City or the Physiology of London Business (1845)

"The Jamaica Coffee House is to the West India trade what the Jerusalem Coffee House is to the East India trade. The proprietors and managers of the Jamaica Coffee House pride themselves upon the accuracy and full extent of their West India intelligence quite as much as the Jerusalem people pride themselves upon the accuracy and full extent of their East India intelligence."

Jonathan Meades

Museum Without Walls

Bremen did not belong to this [narrowly indigenous] Germany. Like Wismar, Hamburg, Stralsund, etc, it was - and nominally remains - a Hansastadt. This was not the Germany that the Third Reich invoked. It was mercantile and international. It became political and martial. It expanded and died. The Hanseatic League was probably God's first try at the EU.

Peter Ackroyd

London: The Biography

Within days of that Fire, however, various speculative maps of a new London were being completed. These were visionary schemes. Many of these seventeenth-century designs for London incorporated grid systems of intersecting thoroughfares, with great avenues linking majestic public edifices. Wren and Evelyn conceived of a humane and civilised city built upon a preordained pattern, while some of their contemporaries presented mathematically ingenious systems of roads and squares. These noble plans could not work, and they did not work. The very nature of the city defeated them: its ancient foundations lie deeper than the level at which any fire might touch, and the spirit of the place remained unscathed.

London is not a civilised nor a graceful city, despite the testimony of the maps. It is tortuous, inexact and oppressive. It could never be laid out again with mathematic precision, in any case, because the long history of streets and estates meant that there was a bewildering network of owners and landlords with their own especial claims or privileges. This is a social and topographical fact, but it in turn suggests a no less tangible aspect of London. It is a city built upon profit and speculation, not upon need, and no mayor or sovereign could withstand its essential organic will.

Julian Baggini

“A level playing field for commuters? No thanks, we’re British”

Efficient, equitable systems are very un-British. Take the system aspect first. The British way is to muddle through on the basis of vaguely understood traditions and conventions. Our entire culture, from our political constitution to the way we queue, is based on that principle of minimal principles. The regulation of social life must be light enough to leave room for discretion and common sense. When Brits abroad see Germans waiting for the man to turn green before crossing the road, even when there isn't a car for miles, they break out in a nervous sweat.

Traditional British fairness is not about treating everyone equally. It's about giving subtle, informal advantage to insiders and locals.

These attitudes towards fairness, efficiency and systems hang together. They flow from Britain's traditionally communitarian ethos, which roots values in the enduring culture of the people. It sees society as an organic whole rather than as a mechanistic system. As such, its flourishing cannot be judged purely on the basis of how much it yields. Nor are its parts replaceable like a machine: to be a fully fledged member requires growing within it.

PART II

Neil MacGregor

A History of the World in 100 Objects: The Mechanical Galleon

What would those south German dinner guests have thought watching this amusing and amazing object in action? They would, of course, have admired the clockwork brilliance of this playful automaton, but they must also have been fully aware that this was a metaphor in motion, a symbol of the ship of state. That idea of the state as a ship, and its ruler as the helmsman or captain, is a very old one in European culture.

In our ship, the greatest technical skill is not the modelling or the gilding of the galleon itself, but the precision engineering of the clock and the automated moving parts. Contemporary observers repeatedly stressed the precision, the orderliness, the grace of mechanisms like this one, which embodied the ideal of the early modern European state - as it ought to have been and so rarely was - with everything working together.

What ruler would not gaze in delight as figures moved to his command in strict and unswerving order? So unlike the messiness of ruling in the real world.

Maya Jasanoff

The Dawn Watch: Joseph Conrad in a Global World

In the first week of autumn, 1878, the biggest city of earth turned around its global axis, getting by and getting ahead, making and spending, investing, inventing, sinning, and selling. Construction crews swept aside the seedy rookeries, grimy courts, and squalid tenements that filled the novels of Charles Dickens and laid down new arteries: Shaftesbury Avenue, Charing Cross Road, Piccadilly Circus. A burrowing network of

Underground trains pumped commuters into and out of the city's heart.

A spider in a worldwide web of somewheres, London caught the world in lines of news. Steamers made ready for Calcutta, Adelaide, Buenos Aires, and Yokohama. Arriving ships brought reports of hurricanes in the West Indies, unrest in southern Peru, a plague of locusts in El Salvador. Stevedores packed warehouses with American cotton, Australian wool, and Caribbean cocoa.

At Liverpool St station, a young man stepped off a hissing train from Norfolk. One item seemed to seek *him*:

Sea. Wanted, respectable Youths, for voyage or term, in two splendid ships for Australia, and others for India, etc. W Sutherland, 11 Fenchurch buildings, est 1851.

Konrad Korzeniowski wanted the job, and he'd come to London to track it down... London was the best place in the world to disappear.

London supplied answers without asking questions. There were no restrictions on who could come into the country: no passports or visas required, nobody could be forced into military service. Nobody got extradited on political grounds. Freedom turned London into Europe's beachcomber, collecting refugees washed up by waves of political change: Poles from the insurrection of 1830, Germans and Hungarians from 1848, Italians who'd fought alongside Garibaldi, French radicals, even France's ex-emperor Napoleon III. Britons took patriotic pride in the country's role as "an asylum of nations", a beacon of liberty.