# Elizabethan London: A Study in Historical Geography[1]

STEPHEN M. SUTHERLAND, University of Oklahoma, Norman

When entering into a field, such as historical geography, in which there are a diversity of opinions as to the nature of the subject, perhaps it is worthwhile to spend a moment on the underlying philosophy. Andrew H. Clark notes that, "Any study of past geography or of geographical change through time is historical geography, whether the study be involved with cultural, physical, or biotic phenomena and however limited it may be in topic or area." (James, Jones 1954) Hartshorne (1939) strengthens the idea of a study of a past geography by saying, "Whereas we commonly assume that the term 'geography,' when used without qualification, refers to a cross-section through the present, we may use the term 'historical geography' for an exactly similar cross-section through any previous point of time." This paper is concerned with a rather limited area, London, at a specific point in time, the Elizabethan period.

Two noteworthy elements of any urban area, whether viewed from the present or historically, are site and situation. In London, both factors have had important roles. The site element appears to have been the more important of the two in earlier times, whereas the situation or relative location of the city has figured more significantly recently.

The site of London is an interesting example of the influence of environmental factors on the life of man. Originally the city was established on two hills which were gravel remnants of a terrace. The hills were enclosed by a wall and Roman Londinium existed within the enclosure. The areal extent of Elizabethan London was not too much greater than that of Roman Londinium. There were other isolated areas of settlement on the gravel terraces which rose above the lower marshlands. Places such as Chelsea, Battersea, and Putney are of this type. The occurrence of an "ea" or "ey" ending on a place name appears to be somewhat indicative of this type of settlement. For many years these "dry point" settlements remained typical of the heart of what is now Greater London. Without becoming deterministic, one can analyze the settlement pattern of 1600 A.D. in the London area and easily conclude the limiting power of the heavy London Clay. Darby (1936), in his monumental work on the historical geography of England before eighteen hundred, points out that

---

[1] Presented at Weatherford, Dec. 11, 1959.

settlement, as late as 1750 and 1800, was partially restricted by this stiff, dark clay. The resulting picture is one in which the spread of London occurs along the gravel terraces where dry sites and, in early days, a local well-water supply were available. The clay areas were given over to grass fields which were used by London's dairy cows.

The relative location of the city of London was important in that the people of England had fixed in their minds the relationship of London to England and to Europe. The picture which the people had at this time is well described by a contemporary, Thomas Miles. Miles, writing in 1604, says, "All our creeks seek one River, all our Rivers run to one Port, all our Ports join to one Town, all our Towns make but one City, and all our Cities and Suburbs to one vast unwieldy and disorderly Babel of buildings which the world calls London." An anonymous author, cited in Stow (1945), explains why the Thames instead of the Severn or Trent should have a royal city on it, but also hastens to warn that the Thames "openeth indifferently upon France and Flanders, our mightiest neighbors, to whose doings we ought to have a bent eye and a special regard."

Estimations as to the city's population at this time are vague and reveal great discrepancies. Taylor (1951) suggests that London's population in 1650, which is post-Elizabethan, was 500,000. Darby (1936), writing of London at 1676 suggests a population of 384,000. Perhaps the most plausible figure for 1600 is somewhere between 100,000 and 200,000.

Regardless of numbers, to the Elizabethan, London was "the city." Technically one might have lived in a township or city of quite some size, yet there remained but one city, London. Quite possibly at no other time in history did London so dominate the whole of England.

Roman Londinium was bounded on the south by the Thames River and on all sides by the old city wall. On the east the wall extended from the Tower to Aeldgate, Bishopsgate, Moorgate, Cripplegate, Aldergate, Newgate, and finally Ludgate on the west side of the city. Even before Elizabeth's time, however, the city had begun to spread beyond its fortified limits. A comparison of Ralph Agas' map of 1560 and John Norden's map of 1593 reveals that large tracts outside the northern and western gates had already been greatly built up. London had already begun to swallow up the countryside, although some areas were to remain rural for quite some time.

London's main mode of transportation at this time was water. The reason for this can be found in that, first, the river held a much more pleasant view than the roads, and secondly, the river was a good deal safer. Boats and boatmen were available for hire up and down the Thames. Boats left for London with every tide and the charge for passage was nominal.

London Bridge was in several ways a unique structure. During Elizabethan times it was the only bridge across the river. The bridge, built on twenty arches, was covered from bank to bank. The distance between the piers was so small that the boats had dangerous journeys while "shooting the bridge" at high tide. Another feature noted in most contemporary views was the spectacle presented by the gatehouse tower which guarded the drawbridge. Here, on poles, were displayed the rotting heads of all those executed as traitors. This was done to serve as a warning to malcontents! The sight was frequent enough and of enough interest to have caused visitors to record tallies on specific days within the confines of their diaries.

Tudor London, more particularly towards the end of Elizabeth's reign,

was an overcrowded and unsanitary city. Although during this period there was considerable building around the city, housing problems within the confines of the city grew more acute. Former palaces had been converted to tenement houses which were crowded from garrett to cellar. Elizabeth tried to enforce the rule of "one house, one family." Both Elizabeth and James 1 (1603-1625) feared the natural growth of London and the growth of the city's power. Their legislation forbade the erection of new building upon unoccupied sites within the city. The poor housing conditions were intensified by the equally bad conditions of the streets.

Except for two or three main thoroughfares, London was a network of badly paved or unpaved streets. In addition to this, the lanes were extremely dark due to the overhanging fronts of the houses which was characteristic of the architecture of the time. As if this were not enough, one often stepped into garbage heaps which, according to the practice of the time, were deposited in front of one's door. Some of the present day main arteries were paved during this time. In 1563 the Mayor and Council asserted themselves as follows: "The filthy dunghill lying in the highway near unto Finsbury Court (will) be removed and carried away." There did exist, however, a fine east-west highway, the Cheapside-Holborn route which still serves as a main artery in central London. It served as the main road, in that the Strand had only recently ceased to be a muddy lane in front of some stables. The most important section of this road was the Cheapside section, famous for its open markets and often honored by the passage of royalty. On the south side it boasted what Stow (1945) called the finest buildings in London.

Although the urban sprawl, with its attendant poor conditions encroached upon the countryside, the areas which escaped this contamination are worthy of note. Botanists went into "the fields of Holborn near unto Gray's Inn." Fields lay between Tower Hill and Radcliffe, and there were fields around the tiny village of Charing Cross which is described as an "outpost of the country stranded between the cities of London and Westminster." North of the outlying village of Kentish Town was some entirely uncleared forest land. There were woods by Hampstead, Highgate, and Islington. The area south of the river was equally rural. South of London Bridge there was little more than a single row of houses along Bankside. East of the Tower on the north side of the river there was a line of houses for about a half a mile and then one was in the open country.

This was Elizabeth's London — a proud city. It was "an ornament to the realm by the beauty thereof," but it was also something new in that it drew so many out of the country. The Elizabethan view of the city was something like this, "A place both for the beauty of the building, infinite riches, variety of all things, that excelleth all the cities in the world."

## SELECTED SOURCES

Byrne, M. St. Clare. 1925. Elizabethan Life in Town and Country, Metheun and Co. Ltd. London.

Darby, H. C. 1936. An Historical Geography of England Before A.D. 1800, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, England.

Hartshorne, Richard. 1939. The Nature of Geography, Edwards Brothers, Inc., Ann Arbor, Michigan.

James, Preston E. and Jones, Clarence F. (eds.) 1954. American Geography: Inventory and Prospect, Syracuse University Press, Syracuse, New York.

Stow, John. 1945 edition. The Survey of London, Everyman's Library Edition, E. P. Dutton and Co., New York.

Taylor, Griffith. 1951. Urban Geography, E. P. Dutton and Co., New York.

Trueman, A. E. 1952. Geology and Scenery in England and Wales, Penguin Books, Harmonsworth, Middlesex, England.