
10 / The Tourist Revival of Charles II's London

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The Coronation of Charles II

This essay takes the reader through the streets of London in 2012 to follow in the footsteps of King Charles II in 1661, along the medieval coronation trail that once linked the Tower of London to Westminster Abbey. My interests are those of an historian who is committed to mediating the city to contemporary visitors by means of cultural tourism and the informative pedagogies associated with the practice of walking the city, of experiencing the city as it would have been traversed in the days prior to modern vehicular mobility. In so doing we are able to perceive some of the ways in which the palimpsest of the city has built up over time, allowing certain features to remain visible and privileged as aspects of the national 'heritage', whilst relegating others to the invisible detritus of history, and so opening up deeper debates over our understandings of both

the 'past' and the 'present' from which we view it. More specifically the research also of course opens up further perspectives on the role of the British monarchy – under so much scrutiny in recent times - in the development of the life of the city and the nation.

In 1660 the heir of Charles I was invited by Parliament to return from exile in mainland Europe, after 11 years of Republican intermission marked by growing repression. After a triumphal entrance in London, Charles II prepared the ground for his ascension by re-instating the Order of the Garter and ordering the creation of new Crown Jewels. This was not just an individual accomplishment, but rather the return of the Stuart dynasty to power: at the age of 30 Charles revealed a striking facial resemblance to his martyred father. This was indeed the return to a timeless way of life that was being revived, not only through symbolic rites and paraphernalia, but also by the daily activities of the ruler himself both on formal and on informal occasions.

The coronation ceremony was held on the 23rd April 1661, Saint George's Day, under a blazing sky. By choosing this date for his coronation, Charles II was hoping that in time the people would see him as the embodiment of the nation's patron saint. Some of the main strategies were the revival of the Order of the Garter, the making of new Crown Jewels largely destroyed by Cromwell, and the creation of four allegorical triumphal arches to be placed along the coronation trail. John Ogilby's painted wooden structures were designed to celebrate the monarchy and Charles II as bringers of peace and prosperity: their success was such that the arches would only be dismantled a year later.

In broad terms, Charles II recovered the medieval trajectory taken by his ancestors, leaving the Tower of London at 10am and moving towards Whitehall Palace where he and his court would spend the night; only on the following day did he reach Westminster Abbey for the coronation ceremony itself. Therefore, our suggested itinerary will start at the Tower with a visit to the Crown Jewels, which includes the very crown placed over Charles II's newly anointed head. This simple re-enactment of a 17th Century event will require considerable creativity and scientific accuracy on the part of the Tour Guide. Indeed, the Guide must be able to lead the clients into visualising the number and variety of the appeals to the senses which were originally deployed, whereby this urban setting served as the stage for Charles to assume his role as leader of the nation.¹

Rebuilding the City after the Great Fire

But other moments in the monarch's lifetime can be referred to along the way as one proceeds into the heart of the City, which was engulfed by the Great Fire of 1666. The King himself, fearful that the fire would reach the gunpowder depot at the Tower of London and that the whole capital be blown to pieces, helped to put fire out. According to Antonia Fraser: *By the end of the day the King's clothes were soaking, his face black, his whole person muddy and dirty. But there were many testimonials to his bravery and resolution as he stood up to his ankles in the water ... encouraging the courtiers to do likewise.*"²

As soon as the situation was under control, the King started dreaming of major urban improvements to a capital whose new scenic streets and squares would be carved in stone.

Sadly, Christopher Wren's plans would not be fully accomplished because of the Parliament's financial and artistic restraints, but a major landmark still stands amidst contemporary high rises: The Monument. Located in Pudding Lane, it recalls the spot where the fire started. It was built by Robert Hooke with *bas-reliefs* on the plinth carved by Caius Gabriel Cibber which portray Charles II dressed as a Roman Emperor, flanked by allegorical virtues and treading over Jealousy.

Resembling an Egyptian obelisk, its shaft was planned to sustain a telescope and to serve as an optical connection with different elements of the new town. However, the resistance of the site's air masses only allowed the placement of a golden sun (or flame) to crown it. It has recently been reopened to the public after restoration, and, after a steep climb, bird's eye views are once again available from the summit. Close by one will find Saint Paul's Cathedral, rebuilt from 1675 to 1709, and astonishingly completed by its only architect, the 90 year-old Sir Christopher Wren. A stone's throw away from Saint Paul's one may also behold Temple Bar, the sole surviving 1672 City gateway that was re-assembled at its original site in November 2004, and that preserves statues of Charles II and his Queen.

A short detour to the Museum of London will reveal a range of quotidian objects from the 17th Century: on wooden buckets that served to fight the 1666 fire (some with the royal arms); Dirck Stoop's panoramic oil painting 'Charles II's Cavalcade through the City of London, 22 April 1661', portraying the coronation route that this essay is attempting to trace; Abraham Hondius's 1684 painting 'A Frost Fair on the Thames at Temple Stairs', depicting the lengthy and inclement winter of 1683-84 and the leisure and trading

activities which took place over the frozen waters of the River Thames. Back in the open air this visit will follow Fleet Street, one of London's oldest and ever busiest arteries, well-known -long before its modern incarnation as the centre of Britain's newspaper industry - for its intellectual and social connections.

Indeed, 17th Century Fleet Street was famous for its taverns and coffee houses, and it stood also close to the house where one of the key Restoration chroniclers, Samuel Pepys, had been born. Pepys' diary is an important historical document because of its description of events, besides personal reflections on people, daily affairs and London itself. The promenade along Fleet Street will not be complete without reference to the fourth triumphal arch of Charles's coronation trail near White Friars, and its allegories on the monarchy's victory over Chaos.

The Strand: Somerset House

The next stop on our journey west will be at Somerset House, the much renovated official residence of Catherine of Braganza, a Portuguese princess who, as the wife of Charles II did not provide an heir to the throne, but managed to endure the King's promiscuous behaviour and some of her subjects' refusal of a foreign and Catholic Queen. Catarina's dowry included £300,000, the port of Tangiers, the island of Bombay, and free trade with the Portuguese colony of Brazil. Catarina also introduced in England a habit that had been common at the Portuguese court since the early 16th Century: the drinking of tea.

On arrival, Catarina did not immediately win her groom's affection due to the simplicity of her garments, shyness and

general allure, but Pepys, for his part, described her as “*the most beautiful woman he had ever seen*”.³ Charles “*grew fond of her, and when in the autumn of 1663 she fell dangerously ill, Charles spent many hours weeping by her bed and doing his best to comfort her*”.⁴

Close to Somerset House there once existed a much-loved Maypole that the Puritans had torn down and which Charles II later rebuilt for his people’s enjoyment. Moving to the end of the Strand, and entering Trafalgar Square, on the walls of the National Portrait Gallery visitors will be able to behold, amidst the work of some of the English and foreign Masters of the age, the faces of Restoration characters like Charles II and Prince Rupert, among others, and to learn about the protection granted to the (visual and decorative) Arts by the Crown and by private sponsors: “*Charles II was more interested in science and naval architecture than he was in Painting. However, the English aristocracy was... the source... of patronage. Portrait painting was to the Seventeenth century what fashionable photography is today*”.⁵

The Former Palace of Whitehall

Our first day will come to a close at Whitehall, home to the modern offices of the British State but also the site of the former royal complex that resembled a miniature city inside London itself: “*Whitehall was not just a building: it was a teeming village of more than 1,000 inhabitants*”⁶. Whitehall was a winter palace where the King lived while Parliament was in session; the rest of the King’s year was completed with journeys across the country. Seat of political power, social representation and mystic rites since the Tudors, the vast *ensemble* of Whitehall Palace vanished in 1698,

consumed by fire. However, the Banqueting House, commissioned by Charles I and decorated by Rubens, survived.

With the execution of Charles I outside the building it witnessed the demise of the Stuart dynasty but also, through his son, the revival of ancient religious rites such as the 'King's Touch'⁷ - revived two months after Charles's arrival in 1660 - and the Maundy Thursday ceremonies, whose goals were to inflate a sense of royal divinity in the minds of the subjects. Between April 1669 and the end of 1684, Charles is believed to have touched a total of 28,983 persons, or an average of some 1,800 per year⁸. The growing number of supplicants explains why certificates with the royal seal started replacing the actual physical touch of the monarch's hand.

Charles II's bedroom at Whitehall Palace took nearly two years to complete and its oval ceiling presented an allegory of the Restoration painted by John Michael Wright, where Justice pointed at Charles I. The most impressive piece of furniture was, obviously, the French bed: raised from the ground by steps, it also included a balustrade placed at its feet, in order to create two distinctive areas inside the room itself (one area for the public, another for his favourites), and topped by a *bas-relief* where angels held the curtains of the alcove and eagles watched over the King's repose. The bed was the central piece of the stage where King and courtiers started and ended the day playing their respective roles. Charles also loved mechanisms, mainly those of clocks, and by 1685 there were already seven clocks in his bedroom alone.

Westminster Abbey

Westminster Abbey has been the site of coronation and royal burial for many centuries. Charles II introduced an important variation. After his coronation the monarch sailed up the Thames to place his robes, not in a church as his forefathers had done, but rather at Drury Lane Theatre, which was an unusual deed; yet, that was a subtle move of what the future had in store. Indeed, this was a ruler known for his *common touch*, meaning that he enjoyed mingling with his people, thus reinforcing his role as the loving father of the nation. Besides, by attending plays alongside his subjects and even allowing them to address him, Charles II progressively acquired the reputation of a 'merry monarch', very different from the remote and sometimes repressive leaders of earlier times. Cromwell and his Puritans, of course, had closed the theatres entirely.

Charles II, however, regularly attended Drury Lane Theatre and enjoyed the performances (on and off stage) of actresses like Nell Gwynn. Indeed, the exile that Charles and many English noblemen had faced in France had refined their taste in theatrical performances. Besides, women's parts were no longer taken by well-trained boys, but by women actresses, which was now a major attraction for male audiences. Another shift in cultural terms was that while the previous rulers invited companies to perform at the royal palace, Charles II was the first King to have his own royal box at Drury Lane Theatre.

Its decoration made it easily recognisable amidst all the other areas of the precinct, since it was topped by the Sovereign's coat-of-arms and a golden statue of Apollo. In the early

1660s Royal charters for the establishment of performing companies in London had been bestowed on Thomas Killigrew and William Davenant: the former was to assemble the King's Players (at Drury Lane Theatre), while the latter was to gather the Duke's Players (at Dorset Garden Theatre). Killigrew breathed fresh creativity into English playwriting when his 1664 *Parson's Wedding* set the rules for a new *genre* that combined wit and obscenity and wit. On the other hand, several plays by John Dryden and others were dedicated to the royal *status quo* against growing Whig opposition: "*With the Restoration art became once again part of public life and a cultural programme viewed as integral to the enhancement of the monarchy.*"⁹

Beyond the Coronation Trail: Towards Greenwich

With the coronation trail itself completed, we continue through the London of Charles II by taking in Birdcage Walk, St. James's Palace, Pall Mall, and Charles II Street. The King's morning started at 5am and included a two-hour stroll down Constitution Hill across St. James's Park, where he would feed exotic birds caged along current Birdcage Walk, accompanied by his beloved spaniels. His affection for these dogs was such that it crossed the centuries and the breed is now known as 'King Charles Spaniels'. Another leisure activity was *pêlé-mêle*, an outdoor sport (half-way between golf and cricket) Charles had come across while living in France, and deeply enjoyed at St. James's Park.

The game gave its name to the street Pall Mall (now famous for its gentlemen's clubs), where at no. 79 a Blue Plaque reminds visitors that the King's mistress actress/mistress Nell Gwyn once lived there. The inclusion of St. James's Palace on

this itinerary will serve to pin-point the birthplace of Charles II, who was also baptised at the Queen's Chapel with water brought all the way from the River Jordan. The city keeps the Sovereign's memory alive on a nearby street named after him (Charles II Street), much as it recalls his father on an equestrian statue at Trafalgar Square, where, every January 30, died-in-the-wool Royalists lay wreaths of flowers to recall Charles I, perceived as a martyr to Cromwell's Republic.

Leaving Central London, we sail down the Thames, recalling its importance to the foundation and evolution of the city before disembarking at Greenwich. Here, drawing upon the resources of the National Maritime Museum, we recall the rise of English naval and commercial power, and the dramatic expansion of its overseas empire, a period in which the reign of Charles II saw "*a remarkable accession of the distant lands to the English flag*".¹⁰ A walk through Greenwich Park will also afford the opportunity to consider the discovery of longitude, and the subsequent measurement of time from Greenwich (Greenwich Mean Time) at the Royal Observatory, where the division of the Eastern and Western hemispheres is marked (and regularly straddled by eager tourists).

Notes and References

¹ For invaluable cartographic information, appearing just as this essay went to press, see Ann Saunders (ed.), *The A to Z of Charles II's London 1682*, London: London Topographical Society, publication no. 174, 2013.

² Antonia Fraser, *King Charles II*, London: Phoenix, 2004, p. 312.

³ Maurice Ashley, *Charles II: The Man and the Statesman*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1971, p. 124.

⁴ Christopher Falkua, *The Life and Times of Charles II*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1992, p. 91.

⁵ Maurice Ashley, *The Age of Absolutism: 1648-1775*, Springfield, Massachusetts: G. & C. Merriam Company, 1974, p. 156.

⁶ Simon Thurley, *Lost Buildings of Britain*. London: Penguin/Viking, 2004, p. 17.

⁸ Tim Harris, *Restoration: Charles II and His Kingdoms, 1660-1685*, London: Penguin Books, 2005.

⁹ Roy Strong, *The Spirit of Britain: A Narrative History of the Arts*, London: Hutchinson, 1999, p. 311.

¹⁰ Fraser, *King Charles II*, p. 563.