

London Bridge Fair

11 July 2009

This year sees the 800th anniversary of the opening of old London Bridge, the first permanent structure built across the Thames. To commemorate this occasion, and to raise money for the Lord Mayors Appeal, the London Bridge Fair took place on Saturday the 11th of July. In a rather inventive twist, the Bridge was closed to traffic for the day and the event was held on the structure itself.

The day began rather inauspiciously with several heavy thunder storms punctuating the drive down from Leicester to London, however once in the Capital the rain had thankfully eased off somewhat to leave a typically blustery grey English summer's day. Weather gripes aside the Bridge itself was abuzz with activity. Approximately 40 stalls lined the length of the Bridge, each stall occupied by one of the various City Guilds or Livery Companies. A broad spectrum of companies was represented, from the smaller and perhaps more obscure guilds, such as the Company of Playing Card Makers or the Company of Basketweavers, to the larger more recognisable organisations such as the Company of Masons. In deference to the Bridge's past, the companies were encouraged to use the stalls to exhibit the methods and materials they would have used to practice their trades in the medieval period.

The first stall encountered upon the approach to the Bridge from the northern side was that of the Company of Blacksmiths. Complete with a working forge, the Blacksmiths demonstrated the art of horseshoe manufacture to an attentive crowd. This noisy, boisterous and evocative stall set the tone for the rest of the jaunt across the Bridge.

Three stalls held a particular interest for our party. The first was manned by the Company of Architects. The Company had run a competition in conjunction with the Royal Institute of British Architecture to design a new "living" London Bridge. Over 70 entries were received, with the pick of the crop being exhibited that day. The designs, flights of pure fantasy and never to be commissioned, all displayed a remarkable sense of vision and inventiveness. Some harked back to the past and drew their inspiration directly from the previous inhabited incarnation of the Bridge, others were far more contemporary.¹

As a historian of the pre-modern period it is perhaps no surprise to learn that the stand manned by the Company of Scriveners held particular interest for me. Watching the steady hands, patience and precise pen work of the scriveners in attendance as they recreated the ornate calligraphy that many pre-modernists will be familiar with was a joy to watch. Another positive aspect of the fair was the ability of those attending to discuss the finer points of these crafts with expert exponents, and my admiration for the scriveners only increased when I learnt that a single highly embellished letter could take up to a day to complete.

A large and animated crowd seemed to be associated with one stall in particular. Upon closer inspection the epicentre of this throng revealed itself to be the stall of the Company of Distillers. The source of the joviality of the congregation could be traced to the potent alcoholic brew that was being freely dispensed by the members of the Company, who were happy to explain the finer points of medieval brewing practices to those still sober enough to understand.

¹ See for yourself at:

<http://www.architecture.com/UseAnArchitect/FindAnArchitect/Competitions/Results/London%20Bridge/FirstPrize.aspx>

Further highlights on the day included the driving of sheep across the Bridge in reference to the Liverymen's ancient rights to do so, and more contemporary displays such as several classic buses and taxis, each beautifully restored to their original grandeur. Both Southwark Cathedral and St. Magnus the Martyr Church put on displays highlighting the historical importance of the Bridge but perhaps it would have been appropriate to have seen a small display on the Bridge itself to allow people to fully understand the importance of the Bridge in the context of the history of the metropolis and therefore appreciate exactly why it was appropriate to be celebrating the 800th anniversary of the structure.

We rounded off the day, as many other fair goers seemed to do, with a trip up to the top of the recently re-opened Monument. The 600 steps up made for a good workout, and the view of the London skyline from the top was as spectacular as one would imagine from 200ft above the City streets.

As with most outdoor activities, the British weather played the spoiler somewhat, but the packed crowds along the Bridge and the lively atmosphere was indicative of a wonderfully well organised and educational event that really did manage to bring history to life, and was a fitting birthday celebration for one of London's most iconic structures.

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Editor's note:

Mark's research has been featured by Times Higher Education

(<http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?sectioncode=26&storycode=407252>) and

London se1 Community Website (<http://www.london-se1.co.uk/news/view/3994>)