

Is it a Film? Is it a Book? Is it a Play? Is it a Song?

A United Wards Club Walk through the City of London
led by Junior Vice President, Stephen Willis

Wednesday 25 June 2025, 5.30 pm.



On a glorious midsummer late afternoon, members of the United Wards Club and their guests — 17 in all — congregated at Tower Hill to begin a most enlightening and enjoyable walking tour. Under the unrivalled guidance of Junior Vice President Stephen Willis — a qualified City of London guide — we explored the City's rich tapestry of literary, cinematic, dramatic and musical connections, punctuated by visits to some of its most significant churches, in honour of our President's theme of religious tolerance.

Our journey began opposite the Tower of London — a looming presence in Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall* trilogy, which charts the rise and fall of Thomas Cromwell. Two acclaimed television adaptations followed, starring Sir Mark Rylance, though, as Stephen revealed, the Tower scenes were filmed not on location but at Dover Castle. The Tower also plays a key role in *A Man for All Seasons* (1960), a play (later a film) centred on the life of Sir Thomas More, executed there in 1535. And it continues to fascinate film directors, having appeared in *Mission: Impossible – Rogue Nation* (2015), *Paddington 2* (2017), and *Spider-Man: Far from Home* (2019).

A short stroll brought us to Trinity Square Gardens, where we heard about Tower Green, the site within the Tower walls where several noblemen and a few Queens met their end. Stephen spoke learnedly about the operatic interpretations of these events, including Donizetti's *Anna Bolena* (1830) and *Roberto Devereux* (1837), which charts the downfall of the Earl of Essex, executed in 1601.

From there, we turned into Seething Lane, stopping at the wonderful statue of Samuel Pepys. Stephen drew our attention to the music that winds around the statue — a song set to music by Pepys himself to the words “Beauty Retire” — and proceeded to sing it, much to the company's delight (and showcasing his own training as a singer and musician).

A few steps away is St Olave's, Hart Street, the church that captivated Charles Dickens and Sir John Betjeman alike. Dickens gave it the rather Gothic nickname “St Ghastly Grim” and described it vividly in *The Uncommercial Traveller*:

“One of my best beloved churchyards, I think, is that of St. Ghastly Grim, which is also called St. Olave's, Hart Street. A small, small churchyard, with a ferocious strong spiked iron gate, like a jail. But the gate is ornamented with skulls and cross-bones, and the churchyard is ornamented with skulls and cross-bones, and the church is ornamented with skulls and cross-bones, and the very gateposts are surmounted by skulls and cross-bones.”

Pepys referred to it as “our own church”; he and his wife lie buried within, their busts placed opposite one another — hers with a gaze that seems sternly to chide him for his misdemeanours, although in truth she died long before him. Betjeman wrote of this church in *First and Last Loves* with typical affection: “St Olave's, Hart Street, is a country church — an East Anglian church on holiday in the City.”

Our trail continued to Minster Court, which featured in the *101 Dalmatians* (1996) — the successor to the cartoon version — and then into Leadenhall Market, recognisable to Harry Potter fans as Diagon Alley in *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (2001).

We then passed near the Jamaica Wine House, formerly a coffee house frequented by Pepys. The Jamaica Wine House and its surrounding alleyways provided the backdrop for *The Riot Club* (2014), a satire on wealth and excess inspired by the notorious Bullingdon Club at Oxford. It says enough, perhaps, that both David Cameron and Boris Johnson were members of this elite fraternity.

Onto Lombard Street, where we paused at the George & Vulture Tavern, the favourite haunt of Charles Dickens and the base of the Pickwick Club in *The Pickwick Papers* (1836). At No. 1 Lombard Street once lived Dickens's first great love, Maria Beadnell — her father a manager at Smith, Payne and Smith.

We swivelled next to Change Alley and St Mary Woolnoth, where John Newton — a former slave trader turned abolitionist — served as rector from 1780 to 1807. Newton wrote *Amazing Grace* prior to his incumbency here, inspiring figures such as William Wilberforce.

A highlight of the tour was Drapers' Hall, the stately interiors of which were used in *The King's Speech* (2010) and also served as the interior of a Russian government building in the James Bond film *GoldenEye* (1995).

Our walk concluded at the monumental Bank of England, an institution steeped in financial history and popular with film directors. It features prominently in *Mary Poppins Returns* (2018), for instance.

The walk concluded in the most delightful and convivial fashion at The Old Doctor Butler's Head, a public house just off Coleman Street. Over supper in a private upstairs room, we savoured Stephen's encyclopaedic knowledge, wit, musicality and flair. Through Stephen's magical touch, the City of London, for seventy-five minutes, became not just a theatre of finance and ceremony but also a stage for literature, opera and cinema — with our own Junior Vice President commanding the boards and the rest of us privileged to play our part as the supporting cast.

Dr Millan Sachania