



Meet the Author: Russ Willey

London Historians meets Russ Willey, the author of Chambers London Gazetteer and Brewer's Dictionary of London Phrase and Fable.



What first sparked your interest in history generally and London's history specifically?

I've enjoyed history since my schooldays (I did it at A level) and I think almost anyone who's lived in London – and who loves the place – gets interested to one degree or another in its past, and I just got carried away. I take particular pleasure in investigative history. Some of the most recherché little localities in Chambers London Gazetteer had never previously been written about in any detail, so there was no opportunity to précis an existing work by a reputable local historian (as I did with certain other entries). Instead I had to trace the place's evolution using every historical map I could lay my hands on, supplementing this with on-the-ground detective work and occasional conversations with lifelong residents.

What gave you the idea for the London Gazetteer?

Many years ago I was in the Barbican Centre one afternoon and I came across a new-fangled machine they'd installed – this was a time when such computer technology was in its infancy. The purpose of the machine was to answer enquiries about all the forthcoming arts events in London. I typed in the simple question: what's on at West End cinemas tonight? The machine asked me to clarify whether I meant the West End in the borough of Ealing or Hillingdon or Westminster. This was undoubtedly a stupid response but it sparked the creation of the London Gazetteer. I considered myself a knowledgeable Londoner but I had no idea there was more than one 'West End' in the metropolis, however insignificant those rivals might be. I began to research and visit London's lesser-known localities as a kind of hobby, and started to write up my findings, then created a website (<http://www.hidden-london.com/>) and that evolved into the Gazetteer, which also includes all the well-known districts, because it would have been perverse to have ignored them.

How long did it take you to do the research?

It's hard to be precise because more than once when the task seemed so monumental, so unending, I abandoned it altogether, only to return to it many months – or even more than a year – later. Not until I finally signed a contract with Chambers, and committed to a deadline, did I really knuckle down to get it finished. I'd say it was about seven or eight years of part-time, on-and-off research and a final 15 months of full-time hard grind.

You must have unearthed dozens of fascinating facts and stories.

Hundreds! That was the wonderful thing about the whole process. I'd be researching some remote and obscure corner of the capital, about which it might have seemed there'd be nothing very interesting to say, and I'd discover it possessed some unique historical characteristics. Let's take the place you call home (with apologies for implying it might be remote or obscure). Northfields was once famed for its orchards, and several streets are named after varieties of apples that were grown there. And Blondin, the most celebrated tightrope walker of all time, spent the last eleven years of his life in a villa he called Niagara House, which stood opposite your local pub. Who'd have thought it – unless maybe they lived nearby and knew of the existence of Blondin Park?

What is your favourite part of London, historically?

Tough choice between Soho and the East End. But most of all, although I compartmentalised London for the Gazetteer, I'm fascinated by the way everything joins up – by the interrelated evolution of all the city's parts. Fitzrovia's umbilical connection with Soho. The effect that the growth and subsequent decline of the London docks had on the East End. The character of almost every locality in London has been influenced – sometimes utterly unpredictably – by occurrences elsewhere, often many miles away. The Gazetteer is full of such chains of events.

Who is your London hero or heroine?

By now you'll be getting the idea that I'm not a decisive person. I'll avoid all the obvious options and name two relatively unsung heroes. Claudia Jones – 'the mother of the Notting Hill Carnival' – was an extraordinary woman whose achievements in the face of adversity deserve much wider recognition. Frank Pick – 'the man who built London Transport' – determined the nature of much of the city's modern transport network: the routes, the appearance of the stations and the style of its graphic design. He was so knowledgeable and enthusiastic about art and architecture that he gave free public lectures on the subject. Can you imagine the managing director of TfL doing that today?

Your second book, Brewer's Dictionary of London Phrase & Fable: what was the motivation for that work?

I've loved Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase & Fable since I first discovered it as a young teenager. I adore its breadth, its pithy definitions and especially its idiosyncrasies. The publishers asked me if I might be interested in producing a London-specific version and I bit their hand off. I have an agent who can be a bit of a terrier in his negotiations and at one point I thought the whole deal might fall through if he kept trying to get me a bigger advance (i.e. something equating to just under the minimum wage). I told him I'd do it for free rather than not do it at all – but luckily it didn't come to that. London is the only city in the world that could have justified its own Brewer's. New York probably has as many present-day 'phrases and fables' to its name but of course it has nothing resembling London's historical legacy.

How did your research for this book differ from London Gazetteer?

Much more of the research for Brewer's was done at a desk, either at home making notes from books or ransacking the world wide web, or in the British Library and its newspaper subsidiary, which is presently in Colindale (but not for much longer). I did occasionally venture out to observe something for myself – for example, I'd never before spotted either the so-called 'London Nose' or the grave of Giro, the dubiously nicknamed 'Nazi dog' – but my explorations bore no comparison to those I undertook for Chambers London Gazetteer. For the Gazetteer, I visited every district and locality in the book – and there are more than 1,300.

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Meet the Author: Russ Willey (cont.)

Picture: Russ Willey.



Grave of Giro, the so-called "Nazi dog".

What big surprises did you come across?

Almost everything in the book that I didn't already know surprised me. And there's an intrinsically sound reason for that. The wonderful thing about Brewer's is that about half of it consists of essential information and the other half is just random stuff the compiler thinks

readers might find interesting. At least that's how I approached it, and I think others have seen it in the same way. When the hardback came out, Robert Elms interviewed me on his excellent BBC London show and he described the original Brewer's as a 'self-defining beast', which I thought was a great way of putting it. Hundreds of the entries in Brewer's London are simply there because I came across some little story or nugget of information during my research and thought, 'Oh! Fascinating!' – and into the book it went.

What causes something to enter the lingua franca or folklore?

It's almost entirely serendipitous, and that's what's often so delightful about it. Someone coins 'Irish jig' as cockney rhyming slang for 'wig' but it never really catches on. A rival neologist comes up with 'syrup of fig' and soon every Londoner is familiar with the term. One wag calls 30 St Mary Axe the 'crystal phallus' and another dubs it the 'erotic gherkin'. The former contrivance is overlooked

while the abbreviated form of the latter gains fame the world over. One author or playwright creates an intriguing character for a successful book or play, and yet he or she is forgotten in a few years. But some penny-dreadful hack invents a murderous Fleet Street barber whose lover uses the victims' flesh as pie filling and their gruesome story resonates and entertains down the ages (and is even believed by some to be true) – and the barber's name becomes rhyming slang for 'Flying Squad', and then the title of an iconic London TV series.

What do you enjoy doing when not researching and writing?

I'm a keen photographer and an even keener manipulator of images once I've downloaded them to my computer (see the before and after example, showing the church of Christ the King, Gordon Square). London is fabulously photogenic. I take a lot of pictures just for fun but others with potential publication in mind. I'm hoping my next book will be fully illustrated throughout but I can't confirm that yet. Maybe you can interview me again when the time comes!



Picture: Russ Willey.

Christ the King: as taken and after treatment.

About Russ Willey

Russ Willey, author, historian, local London expert. His first book, *Chambers London Gazetteer*, gives detailed history of all the localities of London's conurbation and is becoming quite difficult to get hold of. His second book, *Brewer's Dictionary of London Phrase & Fable* was recently released in its first paperback edition. Russ is currently researching his next book.