



Meet the Author: Adrian Tinniswood



London Historians meets Adrian Tinniswood, the author of an eclectic collection of accomplished history and architecture books.

How did you first get involved with the National Trust and the whole architecture thing?

It was a fluke. When I left university in 1977 I got a temporary job at the National Trust's Sudbury Hall in Derbyshire, researching the history of the house and writing educational material for school visits. Until then I had no real interest in architecture (or in history, come to that – my first degree was in English and Philosophy). But something clicked and I knew right away that I'd found what I wanted to do with my life.

From a more architectural focus, when and how did you start writing history books?

In the early 1980s I was working on a research project at Nottingham University on guide literature and historic buildings. The project focused on contemporary practice, but in the course of my research I amassed a big collection of guidebooks from the 19th and early 20th centuries. These guides, coupled with a re-reading of *Pride and Prejudice* – and particularly the scene where Elizabeth Bennett is shown round Pemberley by Darcy's housekeeper – set me thinking about how the business of visiting great houses was conducted in the past. The result was my first book, *A History of Country House Visiting*, which appeared in 1989. I've been writing for a living ever since.

What is it about the Restoration period that attracts you?

I suppose my fondness for the art and architecture of the Restoration comes from my time at Sudbury Hall, which was begun in 1660 and I still regard as one of the loveliest Restoration houses in England. But I also like the uncertainties of the 1660s, the big events – plague and fire – and above all the sense that anything was possible.

Aside from Wren, which architects' works do you admire?

That's a tough one. Lutyens, Philip Webb and Vanbrugh are all heroes of mine – Lutyens for his Englishness, Webb for his integrity, Vanbrugh for his drama. But for the sheer joy he's given me I'd have to pick the king of High Victorian Gothic, William Burges. Cardiff Castle, Castell Coch and Knightshayes Court are outrageously, insanely exciting places to be in. And what other designer would think of using the duck-billed platypus as a decorative motif?

What is your favourite building in London?

No contest. It has to be St Paul's Cathedral. I know that building like the back of my hand, and yet every time I catch sight of it my heart leaps. Every time I step inside, the extent of Wren's achievement takes my breath away. Shards may come and Gherkins may go, but I hope and believe that St Paul's will still be there, defining London's landscape, in another 300 years' time.

Who is your favourite "Londoner of Note"?

Currently, it's Colonel Thomas Rainborowe (d.1648), the great Leveller leader who lived in Gun Alley, Wapping and who argued against Cromwell and for 'the liberty and freedom of the people'.

What is your favourite London interesting fact or story?

There are so many. I think my favourite fact is that with remarkably little help, Londoners managed to have their city up and running again after the Great Fire in just three years. That says a lot for their resilience. My favourite story has to be this: at the end of his life, when St Paul's was nearly finished, Wren fell out with the Dean and Chapter and refused to have any more to do with the work. Every now and then his opinion about the final detailing was still needed, so the Dean used to send one of the members of the Commission for Rebuilding St Paul's round to his house in Scotland Yard. That member was Isaac Newton. What wouldn't I give to have been in the room while Wren and Newton, two of the greatest men this nation ever produced, discussed the finishing touches to England's greatest building?

Your latest book, *Pirates of Barbary*, appears to be something of a departure from your usual themes. How did that come about?

Each of my books seems to have its origins in the previous one. When I was working on my biography of Wren I became fascinated with the Great Fire of London, which of course was the making of Wren as an architect; that led to *By Permission of Heaven*, my account of the Fire. While I was researching *By Permission of Heaven* I read a series of letters from a woman living in Chancery Lane, describing the scene as the flames crept closer and closer. Her correspondent was her cousin, a Buckinghamshire squire called Ralph Verney. That led to *The Verneys*. And while I was writing *The Verneys* I came across Ralph's uncle Francis, who in 1608 walked out on his teenage wife, converted to Islam and became a Barbary Coast pirate. That set me thinking about English renegades and corsairs, and the result was *Pirates of Barbary*.

What are you working on now?

I'm back in 17th-century London with my next book. The Rainborowes charts the lives of a family of merchant-mariners from Wapping, and as usual, I got the idea while I was writing *Pirates*. Captain William Rainborowe led an expedition to free Christian slaves being held by Moroccan pirates in 1637. But it's Captain William's sons and daughters who are at the heart of the story. They're a fascinating bunch – hardline puritans, radicals and colonists. The Rainborowes bridges two generations and two worlds, weaving together the lives of different members of the clan as they struggle to forge a better life for themselves and a better future for humankind in the New World and in the Old, as colonists and entrepreneurs, soldiers and idealists.

About Adrian Tinniswood

Adrian Tinniswood is an accomplished historical author and architectural expert. His London books include *By Permission of Heaven: The Story of the Great Fire of London* and *His Invention So Fertile: A Life of Sir Christopher Wren*. His latest work, *The Pirates of Barbary*, was published last year. Adrian's web site is here.