

# A ROAD BY ANY OTHER NAME



If you thought the street Old Bailey took its name from the courthouse, think again. *Chelsey Baker* uncovers the true origins of our London roads

In fact, Old Bailey is named after a motte-and-bailey (a form of castle positioned on a raised mound, or motte in French, and encircled by a courtyard, or bailey, and surrounded by a large ditch to dispel invaders) that used to run in front of the city wall. Within this particular example, a prison was built when a new gate was made in the city wall in 1188 AD. The prison was demolished in 1902, and in 1904 the Old Bailey (Central Criminal Court) was built on its foundations. The building was named after the street and not the other way round.

This is just one of the golden nuggets that I took away from my meeting with Sean Boru, the original London tour guide who has spent many years researching the true origins of London street names. Renowned for incorporating humour and forgotten facts and trivia about London into his tours, Sean's knowledge of London's monuments and street names won him a regular spot on Capital Gold Radio's breakfast show in 2007. I also found out that Sean has survived Lymphoma cancer three times since 1998 and has ghost-written a best-selling biography for snooker legend Alex Higgins.

Sean's enthusiasm and infatuation with London's past is quite apparent as he imparts all sorts of marvellous facts and stories about our Capital.

Old Street (EC1) was originally named Eald Street after an Anglo-Saxon merchant, but later it deviated to Old Street, as it was the old road out of the city through the Aldersgate.

Fleet Street is named after the river that still flows below ground, and now discharges into the Thames at Blackfriars Bridge.

Liverpool Street is named after the Prime Minister Lord Liverpool (1812-27), and is actually built on the site of the original Bethlem Royal Hospital, which stood on the site for 400 yrs and had a special ward for the criminally insane.

Other London streets have a more ominous history to them. Do you work in Bunhill Row? Well, be careful if you're superstitious, as the street has foundations containing over 1,000 skeletons from the old St Paul's graveyard. You'll be in good company though, they are not just any old bones, amongst them is Daniel Defoe and his wife, along with John Bunyan and many other famous and infamous people. It was nicknamed 'Bonehill' from the original name of Bonhil Fields.

Many streets get their names from their former owners, or because a business was associated with it: Soho was a military training camp until the 1500s when it became a famous hunting estate. The name came from the French hunting call "soho", and the area was marked out using blue posts, hence the name of many pubs in the vicinity. And up until the mid 1850s, most streets in the east of the city sold the same product; in Poultry they sold, well, poultry of course, and in Wood Lane, Milk Lane, Honey Lane, Garlick Hill and Bread Street you could buy their namesakes. Friday Street was where the Catholics bought their fish, but only on a Friday, the Protestants and Huguenots bought their fish on Fish Hill.

Lombard Street is named after the 15<sup>th</sup> Century Italian bankers who introduced paper money from Lombardi. They were promissory notes that 'promised to pay the bearer the sum of...' which you will still find on all bank notes today. They also gave us other words such as 'bankrupt' which was the old Italian word for a broken bench, if you couldn't pay the bearer of a note in coins at the end of the month, their henchmen would smash up your trading bench.

A fascinating trip back in time, discovering the history, intrigue and great stories about London is a unique way to spend a day. ■

Sean's book *"Historie of London and Londoners: A Romp Through the Capital"* is out now.

