



EC1 LITTLE BLACK BOOK

Old Red Lion Theatre

This theatre-pub flies the flag for the area's thespian tradition, in the tradition of the 17th-century Red Bull and Fortune theatres (418, St John Street)

Timorous Beasties

From seaweed prints to graffiti, this is the place to come for unusual fabrics (44–46, Amwell Street)

St John

On the border with Barbican, this restaurant brought offal back onto the nation's menu (26, St John Street)

MagCulture

A store with one of London's largest and best selections of magazines (270, St John Street)

All's well in Clerkenwell

Its renovated warehouse buildings feel thoroughly modern, but this creative district in the capital can trace its roots back to medieval times, finds **Carla Passino**

A MEDIEVAL well lies hidden inside a brick office block on Farringdon Lane. It may look little more than a hole in the ground, but it's from there that Clerkenwell came to life. 'The parish clerks from the City of London would come to perform plays and read from the Bible and, because they gathered around this particular well, it became known as the well of the Clerks,' explains Mark Aston, local-history manager for Islington Council, under

which authority Clerkenwell falls. 'It's not only water that sprung from it, but Clerkenwell's name itself.'

The well originally belonged to the nunnery of St Mary, one of the many religious institutions that found their home in the parish, which, in the Middle Ages, was blessed with a sizeable river (the Fleet, now interred), fertile land, meadows and orchards. 'Clerkenwell was right outside the London city walls, but close enough to it, so was ideal for monasteries.



With four or five in the area, people came to serve them, shops opened and you had quite a nice little village.'

The Knights of St John followed in St Mary's wake, founding their priory in 1144. But the Dissolution of the Monasteries sparked a series of vicissitudes that saw the complex turn into Mary Tudor's house, return to the order during her Catholic Restoration, become the office of the Master of Revelry in Elizabethan times (when 30 Shakespeare plays were licensed there), and, later, suffer the ravages of neglect, falling attendances and wartime bombing. Now the site is once again home to the Order of St John, heir to the original knights: behind its 18th-century façade, the Priory Church hides the original 12th-century crypt in its bowels (open by appointment) and, across St John's Square, the Gate—built in Tudor times, although reworked by the Victorians—houses a museum tracing

the order's history (www.museumstjohn.org.uk). In 2016, incumbent *COUNTRY LIFE* Editor Mark Hedges marked his 10-year anniversary inside the order's Chapter Hall.

'The prison was the setting of a devastating "gunpowder plot", the Clerkenwell explosion'

Still, St John's had better luck than St Mary's, the site of which eventually became a prison. In 1867, it was the setting of a devastating 'gunpowder plot', the Clerkenwell explosion, in which the Fenians tried to blow up the walls to free two prisoners. They failed, but killed 12 people in the process, sparking so much anger that the event is thought to have set back the cause of Irish home rule. Karl Marx,

in London at the time, didn't mince words, noting in a letter to Friedrich Engels that 'the last exploit of the Fenians in Clerkenwell was a very stupid thing. The London masses, who have shown great sympathy for Ireland, will be made wild by it and be driven into the arms of the government party'.

Although he lived in Belsize Park, Marx was a well-known figure in 19th-century Clerkenwell, where the Marx Memorial Library stands today, in the very Green in which Dickens had the Artful Dodger show *Oliver Twist* how to pick pockets. The Marx Memorial Library, originally constructed in 1738, was used by a mattress-maker, a watchmaker and some printers, after a spell as a pub. By the mid 19th century, however, it had become associated with the radical movement that campaigned for universal male suffrage and social reform. It soon evolved into a meeting point for trade unionists and, in 1865, Marx gave ➤

two lectures there. His daughter Eleanor, a socialist campaigner, also worked at the building, which, by 1880, had become a print shop for the Social Democratic Federation, the Twentieth Century Press, of which William Morris was a key benefactor. 'Eleanor would have helped to edit the newspaper that was produced there, *Justice*,' explains Alex Gordon, the library's chair. 'In 1902, when Lenin came to London for the first time, he edited his own newspaper there: *Iskra* (which means the spark) was printed at Clerkenwell Green, then taken to the docks of London, so it could be smuggled into Tsarist Russia.'

Eventually, another artist, Clive Branson, bought the building and founded, in 1933, the Marx Memorial Library, which now houses a vast collection of radical pamphlets, books and letters, including the records of British and Irish volunteers that fought in Spanish Civil War (www.marx-memorial-library.org.uk). Clerkenwell Green is to celebrate another revolutionary mind, suffragette Sylvia Pankhurst, with a statue that should be unveiled next year (www.sylviapankhurst.gn.apc.org).

A handful of years before Marx gave his lectures at what would become his library, Clerkenwell saw the arrival of two large waves of immigrants: the Irish and the Italians. The

former mostly worked on the railways and canals, and tended to move north, but the latter, says Mr Aston, became part of the local fabric. 'They brought their skills, so you had organ-makers, ash felters, alabaster- and marble-workers, musicians and, of course, ice-cream makers. The community has dispersed now, but there still are pockets: a few delis, St Peter's Italian church and, every year, there's the procession of Our Lady of Mount Carmel. It didn't take place last year because of lockdown, but hopefully it will this year.'

'The Victorian era brought new streets and the world's first public underground railway'

The Victorian era also brought changes of a different kind: new streets (Rosebery Avenue and Clerkenwell Road) and the world's first public underground railway, the Metropolitan line between Paddington and Farringdon, which opened in January 1863. 'It was quite revolutionary: you had workers travelling through London and the rest is history,' says Mr Aston. Harking back to those days, a new

THE UPS AND DOWNS

Residents love the atmosphere: 'Clerkenwell still feels like a village, especially on a Saturday or Sunday,' says local historian Mark Aston

Residents like the many local pubs, such as the Crown, the tiny Jerusalem Tavern, the Harlequin and the Sekforde

Residents could do with a little more green space

Tube line looks set to change Clerkenwell's history once more: the Elizabeth line will stop at Farringdon station, which is expected to become one of London's busiest stops. This will make transport easier for the new trades—designers; creative agencies—that are taking over the old Victorian warehouses.

The Museum of London is also moving into part of old Smithfield, so it's going to make the area even more vibrant,' points out Mr Aston. 'There's a lot for Clerkenwell to look forward to in the future—but hopefully as well as keeping a foot in the past and remembering its history.' 🐦

At home in Clerkenwell



Amwell Street, £2.5 million

With four to five bedrooms, this Grade II-listed Georgian house is ideal for a family. The almost 1,900sq ft interiors make the most of original features, which have been paired with period-authentic ones. Contemporary touches have been introduced, too, such as the kitchen with Sub-Zero and Gaggenau appliances, the bathrooms with walk-in rain showers and underfloor heating throughout. The paved garden is perfect for alfresco dining. *Hamptons* (020-3369 4378; www.hamptons.co.uk)



Britton Street, £3.25 million

Plenty of space awaits behind the blue door of this Grade II-listed Georgian house, which overlooks St John's Gardens. The interiors span 3,235sq ft across five floors, some of which are connected by a glass lift. A self-contained apartment takes up the lower ground floor, with an open-plan kitchen and dining area, office and reception rooms on the raised ground floor and the bedrooms on the top floors. *Winkworth* (020-7405 1288; www.winkworth.co.uk)



Dallington Square, £3,532 pcm

An early-20th-century stable complex, Dallington Square was converted into mews houses in 1998 and this two-bedroom, warehouse-style duplex occupies the ground and first floor. The 1,228sq ft interiors, with their high ceilings, large windows and exposed brickwork, are split into a vast open-plan kitchen, dining and reception area, with two bedrooms upstairs. The property also comes with a small decked garden at the front. *Dexters* (020-7483 6369; www.dexters.co.uk)