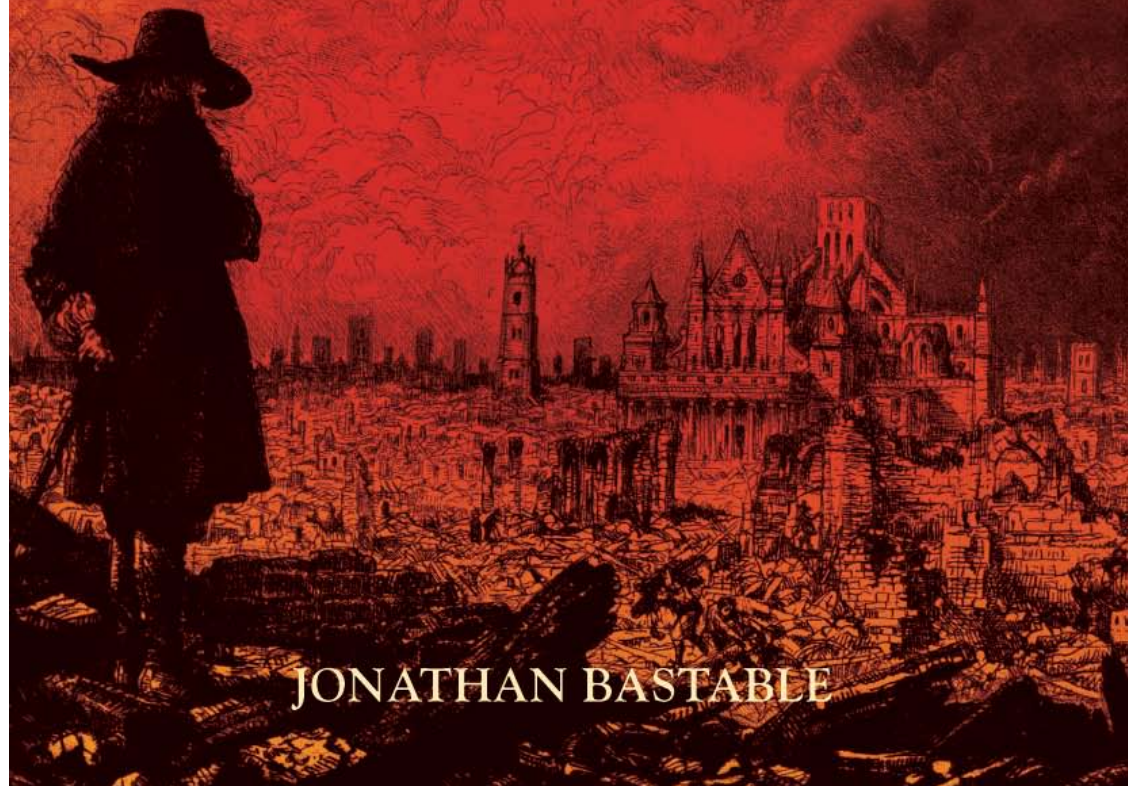


VOICES FROM
THE WORLD OF
*Samuel
Pepys*



JONATHAN BASTABLE

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Samuel Pepys

and *his World*

It is more than 300 years since Samuel Pepys walked the streets of London. But if he were to come back today to the city where he was born, he would have no trouble getting his bearings. There are buildings enough that date back to his time, and the vast majority of street names are unchanged.

He might begin a tour of the modern city at the most enduring landmark of all – the Tower of London. The fortress is a thousand years old now, and it was venerably ancient then. Pepys would have walked under the shadow of its thick Norman battlements almost every day. He was just as familiar with the view of the Tower from the water. On hundreds of occasions he passed by Traitor's Gate as he was rowed up and down the River Thames on official business. He knew the inside of the Tower too: for a short, unhappy spell he was a political prisoner inside its walls.

Close by the Tower is the Church of All Hallows, from the spire of which Pepys looked out on the smoking debris of London after the Great Fire. The church itself was only slightly damaged, and is much as Pepys would remember it. After crossing Great Tower Street (stopping only to wonder at the endless river of traffic and the infernal din it makes) Pepys, or his ghost, would come to the foot of Seething Lane. This is the street where he lived during the ten years he kept his famed diary. His workplace, the Navy Office, was here too.

The home that Pepys knew has long since disappeared: the site is now occupied by a disappointingly anonymous office block. But halfway up the road the ethereal Pepys would be gratified to come across a bust of

his own self, standing on a pedestal in a narrow urban garden. A little further on he would encounter another flattering surprise: the dead end he knew as Catherine Court, just down the road from his apartments, is now a cut-through called Pepys Street.

Across the way from the site of the Navy Office stands Pepys's parish church, St Olave's. This is where Pepys worshipped most Sundays, and where he buried his wife Elizabeth. The memorial he had made for her is still there, to the north side of the altar. High on the wall of the church's south aisle, close to the spot where he was wont to sit in the Navy Office gallery, is a large plaque dedicated to Pepys himself. It was erected there more than a century ago by one of his Victorian editors. Like Elizabeth's monument, it takes the form of a life-sized carving of its subject's head. So the stone likenesses of man and wife gaze affectionately and eternally at each other across the empty pews.

As he wandered the streets close to his old office, Pepys would be pleased to see that this part of town is still dedicated to the sea and to nautical endeavour. The grand Edwardian massif of the Port of London Authority dominates the area; Trinity House, the organization that maintains Britain's lighthouses, is just around the corner. On Pepys Street there is a 1960s block called Mariner House, and the old pub nearby on Hart Street is called The Ship. All this would make Pepys feel very much at home: in many ways, he would be no stranger in today's London.

But there would be much that struck him as odd or baffling. Since he was intensely interested in money he would, for example, be intrigued by what has become of the national currency. In his day, and for generations after, the English pound was divided into 20 shillings and each shilling into 12 pennies. It follows that there were 240 pence in a pound, and that an old shilling is equivalent to 5p in modern-day terms.

The decimal currency would seem bizarre to Pepys, but he would be much more astonished by the devaluing effect of three centuries' inflation. The prices of everyday things would stagger him. In his day, a loaf of bread cost a penny. A domestic servant could expect to earn a pound a year; and Pepys, at the outset of his naval career in 1660, knew that he could live very comfortably on a government pay-packet of

£250 pounds per annum. In fact he raked in much more than his official salary. By the end of the diary period he had savings in the region of £10,000, and could count himself a very wealthy man.

The altered state of the English language would fascinate Pepys as much as the changes in the English coinage. From a linguistic point of view, Pepys lived on the cusp of the modern era, when the norms of what we now think of as 'Standard English' were beginning to emerge. So while Pepys's writing is unquestionably modern, he does use some redundant forms. Among them are contracted adverbs such as 'mighty' ('I was mighty pleased ...'), which was a particular affectation of the time. The old third person singular of the verb to do – 'doth' – crops up often, as do obsolescent past tenses such as 'ketch'd' for 'caught' and 'durst' for 'dared'.

Pepys's orthography is unpredictable. Dr Johnson's English dictionary was still a century away, and in Pepys's day a man's spelling was almost as much a matter of personal idiosyncrasy as his handwriting. Pepys habitually writes 'then' for 'than', and often spells the same word different ways in the space of a few lines. The rendering of proper names was particularly unstable. Pepys had an actress friend to whom he refers as Mrs Knipp or Mrs Knepp, apparently without knowing or caring which was right. And take Pepys's own surname, though Pepys always spelled it in the odd manner that we now know him by, his contemporaries noted it variously as Peps, Peyps, Peeps, Peypes and Pippis. No one, not even Pepys, could tell them they were wrong. Occasionally the spelling or meaning of a word in the diary, or in some other text, is so arcane or archaic that it is hard for a modern reader to understand. So in this book, any word that is likely to confuse is explained in square brackets at the point where it occurs.

But generally speaking, the English of the mid-17th century, even with its peculiar locutions and conventions, is not difficult for a 21st-century English-speaker to follow. Some of the people whose voices are heard in this book are naturally harder to make sense of than others. For example John Evelyn, the other great diarist of the Restoration period, is fond of forms of expression so extravagant and complex that they must occasionally have taxed his own contemporaries: he is not

a straightforward writer. Pepys, on the other hand, wrote his diary in a style that is spontaneous, vivid, almost chatty. His words are generally a pleasure to read because his affability, his democratic instincts and his *joie de vivre* shine through in every paragraph.

Herein lies another reason that Pepys would be at home in our times: he is really not very different from the people who, centuries later, still crowd the streets he knew so well. He desperately wanted to succeed in life; he worried about his health; he argued with his wife though he loved her dearly; he liked a drink and sometimes drank too much; he did his best to live up to the standards he set for himself, and usually failed. This most important part of Pepys world – his interior world – is exactly like yours and mine. He provided posterity with the chance to share in it, and that is his unique achievement.

The World Turned *Upside Down*

At the time of his birth, Samuel Pepys seemed destined for ordinariness. There was nothing in the least bit remarkable about the time or the circumstances of his arrival. His father, John, was a jobbing tailor who had done his apprenticeship in Cambridgeshire, and had come to work in London as a young man. It was in the city that he met and married Margaret Kite. She was from a family of butchers, and had been a washerwoman until her marriage. Now her job was managing the busy household and the almost annual round of childbirth. Sam was the fifth of her eleven children, most of whom – and this was depressingly normal – did not survive to adulthood.

The couple lived in tall tottering house at Salisbury Court, a ramshackle square located between Fleet Street and the slow, smelly highway of the River Thames. Salisbury Court had once been a bishop's palace – Salisbury House. Over the course of the previous century, the palace and the surrounding buildings had been subdivided and extended to make homes for artisans such as John Pepys. Sam was born above his father's cutting shop on 23 February 1633.

The 1630s were a brief interlude of relative quiet in England's history. The glorious, martial era of 'Good Queen Bess' had come to an end a generation before. Only a few very aged men could now remember how, as small boys, they heard the news of the defeat of the Spanish Armada. As for the other great glory of the Elizabethan age, William Shakespeare, there were still a good few people around who could recall seeing him and his players fret and strut their hour upon the stage. But his unique genius was as yet unrecognized, and the stage itself – the

Globe across the river in Southwark – had burned down 20 years before in the time of James I. The reigning monarch, Charles I, had been on the throne for eight years. He had been ruling without parliament for the past four, and this was the cause of grumbling discontent in political circles. But the kingdom was – albeit a little uneasily – at peace.

The most exciting thing about the world of the young Samuel Pepys was the city in which he found himself. More than half a million people lived in London, by far the largest city in the kingdom. But though London was immense by contemporary standards, it was not so large that one person – one curious and streetwise boy – could not get to know its byways and bailiwicks in their entirety. It was an easy walk to the open fields of Islington and Hackney, a rather longer hike through the separate conurbation of Westminster and beyond that, to the little village of Chelsea. On the streets outside Pepys's father's house there were fascinating things to be seen: that new-fangled invention, the sedan chair; a sailor with a live and comical dodo tucked under his arm; the cock-fights in Shoe Lane; the fish-market at Billingsgate; the jugglers and the puppet-shows at St Bartholomew's Fair in Smithfield.

But the many pleasures and possibilities of metropolitan life were suddenly denied to the boy Samuel when, at around the age of nine, he was sent to live with his uncle Robert at Brampton in Cambridgeshire. It is not clear what prompted Samuel's parents to send him away. Perhaps it was anxiety brought on by the successive deaths of many siblings. Samuel was already troubled by pain in his kidneys – so possibly it was thought that removing him from the crowded streets and polluted air of London might do his health some good. Or maybe John and Margaret saw some spark of talent in their young son, and thought it might best be nurtured in the provincial homeland of the Pepyses, where they had one slightly distant but highly placed relative. Samuel's great aunt Paulina had in 1618 made an astonishingly good marriage to Sir Sidney Montagu, brother of the Earl of Manchester. The Montagus held estates in Cambridgeshire, and were socially and politically very well-connected both in the provinces and in London.

The Montagus were also patrons of the university at Cambridge, and it may have been that Samuel's educational prospects were at the