

INTERESTING AND DELIGHTFUL

The UK's all-time most successful non-fiction writer takes a look at London

Born in the American Midwest ('I come from Des Moines. Somebody had to.') and a resident of England for most of the past 35 years, author Bill Bryson OBE lived and worked in London for many years and continues to visit the capital regularly from his home in Norfolk. In November, he received an honorary doctorate from King's. A keen observer of all things British, here he shares some thoughts about London's evolution during his time in the UK and suggestions for exploring the capital.

First, where does London rank in your list of favourite cities?

At the very top. It's the most interesting city in the world. You could argue that it doesn't have the same sort of electricity as New York, but it compensates for that in so many other ways. It has much more history and so much more serenity. You have quiet spots that you can turn to in a way that you haven't got in New York City. In London you've got squares, parks and little secret corners and mews and all that sort of thing. It's just so much more interesting and delightful.

What have been the most significant changes to the capital during the past 35 years?

In some respects, one of the most wonderful things is that it hasn't changed all that much. If I were to go back to the London of the 1970s, it would still be recognisable. I couldn't say the same thing about Des Moines, my hometown. Part of what's wonderful about London is that it's managed to hold on to so much of what is physically and visually important.

Obviously, if you look more closely, there are many things that have changed in big ways. Two are really striking. One is the food: it's so much more diverse and cosmopolitan than it was back then. When I first came here, there wasn't even a single McDonald's in Britain. Now, people are able to eat amazingly exotic foods in London, whereas back then mayonnaise was an exotic substance.

Second, London has become much more of a 24-hour city and seven-days-a-week city than it was, which is probably both good and bad. Things used to shut down a lot earlier and

most shops were closed on Sundays. Parts of the week were very, very quiet.

Some folks, maybe most famously John Cleese, say London is no longer British and that they feel like foreigners in the capital today. Do you share that concern?

I don't find that to be a concern at all. I think it's wonderful! To me, it's one of the dazzling things about London or any great cosmopolitan city. You could say the same about New York or Paris. One of the crucial factors that makes a city exciting and cosmopolitan is that you hear lots of different voices and you see lots of different skin tones and lots of types of dress. That's something that gives a city texture and depth.

The time to be worried about a society is when people from outside *don't* want to live here. There isn't a more flattering fact than that so many people from so many different places – not just from the poor world but people from the rich world, like me – want to be here.

As a former President of the Campaign to Protect Rural England, you're concerned about threats to the English countryside. Are there threats to the physical character of London?

On the whole, the British still do a good job of looking after not just London but the historic character of the country. Britain is more alert to that and more sensitive to that than a lot of other countries. But, there is a great danger in Britain – because there is so much old stuff – of thinking somehow that the stockpile is infinite. There's always a danger that these things will get nibbled away until they're so much diminished that there's serious loss.

For example, not far from where I often visit in West Kensington there was a redevelopment lately. And there was a really wonderful corner Victorian pub, like you've seen on hundreds of corners all over the country. It was just a three-storey pub that was built probably sometime between 1870 and 1890. It was a handsome building, but because it was so common it was also sort of an anonymous building. Then it got knocked down and replaced by a modern building.

It just seems a shame that they couldn't have built around it or have done something to save it.

Another worrying trend – and it's happening in cities all over the country – is this business of cutting out the curb and turning the front garden of terraced homes into parking. I think that completely destroys the character of a street.

Do you have a favourite place in London most people don't know about?

My favourite place in London that anybody can go to and nobody does is Wellington Arch in the middle of Hyde Park roundabout. You go up the arch – there's a viewing platform near the top – and you're up much higher than you realise. You get a very good view, right into the gardens of Buckingham Palace and all of that area of London. And watching the dynamics of cars going around Hyde Park roundabout! You can stand there watching it for 20 or more minutes because it's just so absorbing to see how traffic flows.

If you could travel in time, when would you like to visit London?

You'd probably want to go sometime when you could provide valuable information to the world, so you wouldn't go to a well-known era. But if you're asking when I'd like to go emotionally, then I'd want to go straight back to Shakespeare's London. I would've loved to have seen it, to smell it, to walk around in it and feel what it was like. To watch one of Shakespeare's plays at the Globe and to have a chat with him over an ale afterwards – what a wonderful opportunity that would be. Offhand, I can't imagine anything I'd rather do more than that.

Finally, what is the absolute best way to spend a springtime afternoon in London?

Just walk! My favourite thing in the world is to walk in London. What amazes me about London is that I can walk in areas that I think are pretty well known to me, that I've visited over 30 years, and I still make new discoveries.

Interview by James Bressor

