



Press Information: For Immediate Release

A Brief History of London's Chinatown

Chinatown is an integral part of London's history: haunt of Boswell and Reynolds, birthplace of the post office, first site of Ronnie Scott's, host to immigrant communities from the Huguenots to the Maltese and now London's vibrant Chinese quarter. The bustling Chinese community of restaurants and businesses has been here since the 1950s; however, the Chinatown story goes much further back – right across London and all the way to the Far East.

London's original Chinatown was in the East End, where Chinese employees of the East India Company had first appeared in the 18th century. The Company employed thousands of Chinese sailors; most were based in China, but a small number chose to leave their ships and settle in the docks at Limehouse. By 1914, there were a few hundred Chinese running some 30 Chinese businesses in Limehouse: mostly small shops and restaurants which catered for Chinese seamen. However, the post-war years posed a major threat to the small community; Limehouse had been destroyed during the London Blitz, and the decline of the British shipping industry resulted in new union rules that made it virtually impossible for non-British seamen to find work on British ships.

By 1950, London's Chinese were short of income and short of a place to live. However, a new phenomenon was to turn this situation around. British soldiers had returned from the Far East with a new appetite for Chinese cuisine. A few restaurateurs set up business in Gerrard Street in the West End, a street that already had a reputation for interesting cuisine as the site of some of London's first European restaurants. The popularity of the new Chinese establishments attracted more Chinese entrepreneurs away from the East End to seek their fortunes, and the Chinatown of today was born.

The area in which this new Chinatown would stand had an interesting history: one that stretched back to the terrible Great Fire of 1666 in which London was destroyed by flame. In the aftermath, attention turned west of the old city to the area of present-day Soho which was then mostly farmland with a prime location near the three royal palaces of Westminster, Whitehall and St. James. The area of modern-day Chinatown was a military training ground where soldiers drilled with pikes and primitive muskets.

In 1677, Lord Gerrard, the owner of the area, gave permission to a developer named Nicholas Barbon to build houses on the military ground. Barbon completed Gerrard Street in 1685 and then acquired the adjoining land on the east side from Lord Newport. Here, he built more houses and a livestock market, complete with a market hall and slaughterhouse which stood on the site of the present-day Newport Court.

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Within a century, the area had developed a lively reputation. The upstairs floor of the market hall was taken over by a congregation of immigrant French Huguenots and was named 'the Butcher's Church' after the slaughtermen downstairs. Gerrard Street became well known for its artists and was home to many of the most famous painters, metalworkers and writers of London. Intellectuals and political luminaries met at the Turk's Head inn to discuss the issues of the day in the liberally alcoholic atmosphere. In the 19th century, the Newport Market area developed a reputation as a notorious criminal slum which persisted until the new streets of Shaftesbury Avenue and Charing Cross Road were driven through it in the late 1880s. All the while, new waves of immigrants arrived in the area: Italians, then Jews, then Maltese. Kate Meyrick ran the notorious '43' club at 43, Gerrard Street and Ronnie Scott set up his first jazz club in the basement of number 39. By the time the Chinese arrived in the 1950s, the area had developed a reputation for great nightlife and cheap commercial rents.

By the late 1960s, Chinatown was truly established as a centre for London's Chinese community – now numbering in the tens of thousands as more and more Chinese workers arrived from the British territory of Hong Kong. The area became home to a Chinese supermarket, a Far Eastern travel agency and other services set up to cater for the ever-increasing number of restaurant workers in the area. Families were reunited as wives and children arrived from Hong Kong to join their husbands; and as the community grew, so did the area's reputation for world-class Chinese cuisine. Chinese Gates, street furniture and a Pavilion were added as Chinatown came of age - symbols of the success and the cultural heritage of this fascinating area of London.

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