

Then and Now 1 - The City (of London) from Somerset House



Top Picture - The City from Somerset House by Canaletto (painted about 1752)
Royal Collection Trust © Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2015

Canaletto (1697-1768) was a landscape painter from Venice. He became a popular artist amongst British aristocracy in the 18th Century who had been to Italy on the [Grand Tour](#). In 1746 he came to London and painted these two views of the Thames in about 1750. Because we know that the location for the paintings is [Somerset House](#), it gives us a unique opportunity to compare London in 2015 with London over 260 years earlier from a primary source. The paintings were bought by George III in 1762 from Joseph Smith. They are still in the Royal Collection and form part of the [The First Georgians: Art & Monarchy 1714-1760](#) exhibition at the [Queens Gallery in 2014](#).

Look at both pictures and find these comparative details:

Canaletto Painting - 1750

1: St Paul's Cathedral was designed by Sir Christopher Wren as part of the rebuild of both St Paul's and much of the City of London following the disastrous fire of 1666. The dome was completed in 1709.

2: 88 Parish churches were destroyed in the Fire of London in 1666. 51 were rebuilt to the designs of Wren. Almost 100 years after the fire, it is the spires of the parish churches that dominated the horizon in 1750.

3: The Great Fire of London (1666) is commemorated by the Monument, built in 1667 on the site of the start of the fire in a baker's shop in Pudding Lane. The gold top of the Monument can be seen in the high resolution image, at the left hand end of London Bridge

4: "London Bridge is falling down" referred to the famous London Bridge which had narrow arches and houses on top. The bridge can be seen best in the [high resolution image](#) of the painting where the houses are quite distinct above the arches. This medieval version of London Bridge was first built in about 1200. By 1750 it was already over 500 years old and in a poor state. The houses on top were demolished in 1757 and the whole bridge replaced by a Victorian bridge in 1829. We are lucky that Canaletto caught the old bridge in this painting. London Bridge is the only bridge in the painting looking East from Somerset House.

5: The curve of the Thames showing the North bank and the buildings in the City of London is quite clear. The edge of the river was still quite marshy in 1750. The painting probably shows the river at high tide because no foreshore or marsh is visible





6: Between about 1100 and 1729 the only other bridge over the Thames in London was at Kingston upon Thames. Water boat men had, therefore, a long tradition on the Thames of providing transport along and across the river. They were still very popular in 1750, which is why there are so many small boats in the painting.

7: The detail in the painting even gives us a view of clothing worn in London in 1750. The figures are on the River Terrace of Somerset House.



Photograph - 2014

1: The dome of [St Paul's Cathedral](#) still dominates the skyline of this part of the Thames looking East towards the City of London. The Cathedral is still a church and a popular tourist destination. Sight lines to the dome are protected by planning regulations. This means that new tall buildings cannot obstruct the view we have of the dome of St Pauls, preserving the view painted by Canaletto.

2: Only 13 of the churches rebuilt by Wren remain in their original form. Many churches were either demolished in the 19th Century or destroyed in the Blitz (1940-44) during the Second World War. Some of the [Wren churches in London](#) have been rebuilt but are swamped by the new tower blocks in the City of London.

3: [The Monument](#) (see image right) is still visible on the skyline with a distinct gold top and is open to visitors. It is 61m tall and has good views from the top.

4: [London Bridge](#) has been rebuilt several times since the bridge with houses was demolished in 1757, about 5 years after Canaletto painted his view of the City. The piers of the current bridge (built in 1973) can just be seen behind Blackfriars Bridge. [Tower Bridge](#) (built 1894) is often confused with London Bridge. Tower Bridge is not in view as it is further round the bend of the Thames and is obscured by the tall buildings on the south bank (on the right). There are lots more bridges in London now.

5: The north bank of the Thames follows the same curve as it did in 1752. In 1865 the [Victoria Embankment](#) but was built out over the river bed. This provided a tunnel for the Circle and District Underground line, a road (Victoria Embankment) over the top, a large sewage pipe and a solid edge for landing passengers from boats. The river is still tidal here but passengers can land at any time as the gangways rise and fall with the tide.

6: Ferries have changed somewhat from the 18th century. They are bigger and there are fewer of them. There are still some [timetabled ferries](#) but many boats now are catering for tourists who want to see London from the river.

7: The style of dress from 1750's to modern day has changed dramatically.

8: [The Shard](#) is the tallest building in Western Europe. It was opened in 2012 so was not in Canaletto's 18th century painting.

9: Trees planted in front of the terrace on the Victoria Embankment now obscure the view seen by Canaletto looking East from Somerset House. This photograph taken looking East from the North end of Waterloo Bridge gives a better comparative view.

