

Celebrating Chinese New Year:

The History of Chinatown

February 2014



The 31st January 2014 saw the beginning of the Chinese New Year - the year of the horse - with celebrations taking place in London on 2nd February.

At the heart of the celebrations stands Chinatown, centred on Gerrard Street, between Shaftesbury Avenue and Lisle Street in the West End. It may appear as if this area has been home to the Chinese community for generations, but in fact it is barely 60 years old.

The original Chinatown of London was not in the West End, but was by the banks of the Thames at Limehouse in the East End. It was first established during the 18th century when Chinese sailors, employees of the East India Company, began to settle in London. This small community continued to develop during the 19th century with shops and businesses, but all this changed after extensive bomb damage was inflicted on the docks during the Second World War. A large portion of the old Chinatown was destroyed and the Chinese community were forced to move elsewhere.

Prior to the developments of today's Chinatown, the area looked much like the surrounding areas of Covent Garden and Soho.

Gerrard Street (original spelt "Gerard") was first built as a residential street during the 1670s and 80s, shortly after the Great Fire of London. At this time it belonged to Charles, Lord Gerard who became the 1st Earl of Macclesfield, which also gave the name for Macclesfield Street. The earliest residents during the 1680s were largely wealthy Londoners and members of the aristocracy, including William Cavendish later 1st Duke of Devonshire.

At this time the annual rateable value of the larger houses in Gerrard Street ranged from £120-£200, which equates to around £14,000 to £22,000 in today's money, but with a buying power of approximately between £2 million and £3.5 million.

By the 18th century, Gerrard Street and the surrounding area had evolved into a lively centre of London and became the home of many celebrated residents, including a number of artists and writers. The poet John Dryden lived in Gerrard Street during the late 17th century, and Samuel Johnson and Joshua Reynolds met at the former pub *The Turk's Head* where they founded *The Club* in 1764. Later, Ronnie Scott's jazz club was founded in the basement of No.39 Gerrard Street, and in 1968 another basement flat was the location for the first rehearsal of Led Zeppelin.

It was during the 1950s and 60s that the area around Gerrard Street began to evolve into the Chinatown we know today.

After the Second World War, with returning servicemen having experienced the food and culture in the Far East, along with a growing number of immigrants from Hong Kong, new restaurants and businesses began to open in the area, particularly helped by cheap rents and short leases at the time.

By the 1980s, the new Chinatown of London was firmly established, with a large number of restaurants, as well as schools, bookshops, doctors, and a growing number of businesses.

In 1985 the first organised Chinese New Year celebrations took place in Chinatown and by the end of the 80s the familiar Chinese gates and Chinese street furniture were installed. Today, Chinatown has become an integral part of the life of the West End.