

THE TRUE STORY OF DICK WHITTINGTON (c. 1354 to 1423)

Early Life

Richard Whittington, (known as Dick), was born around 1354 in Pauntley, Gloucestershire into a family of MPs! He was the third son of Sir William Whittington and Joan Maunsell. Sir William died in 1358 leaving a small debt behind him. There are no records of his time in Gloucestershire.

Apprenticeship to the Mercers

There is plenty of evidence of Whittington's work as a Mercer, so whilst his apprenticeship isn't documented, it is probably safe to say that this is the reason he left Gloucestershire. During the medieval period, it was seen as 'good for a child' to be sent away from home to work, sometimes from as young as the age of 9 and certainly before they were 14. Children from impoverished families will have worked as servants for obvious financial reasons, but parents of means will have saved up to buy an apprenticeship for their children¹.

Whittington was born shortly after the Black Death, and with a heavily depleted population², it is not unreasonable to suppose that he started his apprenticeship sooner rather than later.

The Journey to London

Whittington left behind no personal records, so we will never know for sure the route that he took. However, our research has revealed a somewhat different route to the one traditionally associated with the character.



The legend tells us that Dick entered London via Highgate Hill, and in some versions travels via Oxford, making his journey comparable to the route of the modern-day M40. However, we found a piece of evidence from a group called the Whittington Walkers* that Whittington may have walked to Maidenhead, and then sailed into London. To figure out which route was more likely, we looked back in time at Britain's Roads.

A Short History of Britain's Roads

There is very little archaeological evidence of any roads in Britain until the Romans. When they returned to Rome in 425AD, they left behind them a network of well built structures, including the roads. Those roads continued to be used, and the local monasteries carried out maintenance of them in their locale until their dissolution in Tudor times.

During the Medieval Period, no new roads were built, but rather well trodden routes turned into tracks, and travellers tended to follow the track. If the track wasn't well trodden, or an alternative route became popular, then nature would simply reabsorb the track and so very little archaeological evidence remains from roads of this time.

The earliest map to be useful for navigation, the Britannia strip map, was printed in 1564. It clearly shows the St David's to London Road passing through Gloucester, which makes it the most likely option for Whittington to have walked. It also goes through Maidenhead!

* BBC Radio Gloucestershire celebrates 400 years since the first performance of Dick Whittington

The Journey of Dick Whittington 1365

Day 1: Pauntley to Gloucester

(~11 miles) - Walked along an old Roman Road



Day 2: Gloucester to Cirencester

(~19 miles) - Walked along
an old Roman Road



Day 3: Cirencester to
Lechlade on Thames

(~14 miles) - Walked along
a Medieval Road



Day 4: Lechlade on Thames to
Abingdon

(~21 miles) - Walked along
Medieval Roads

Day 5: Abingdon to
Henley on Thames

(~21 miles) - Walked along Medieval Roads





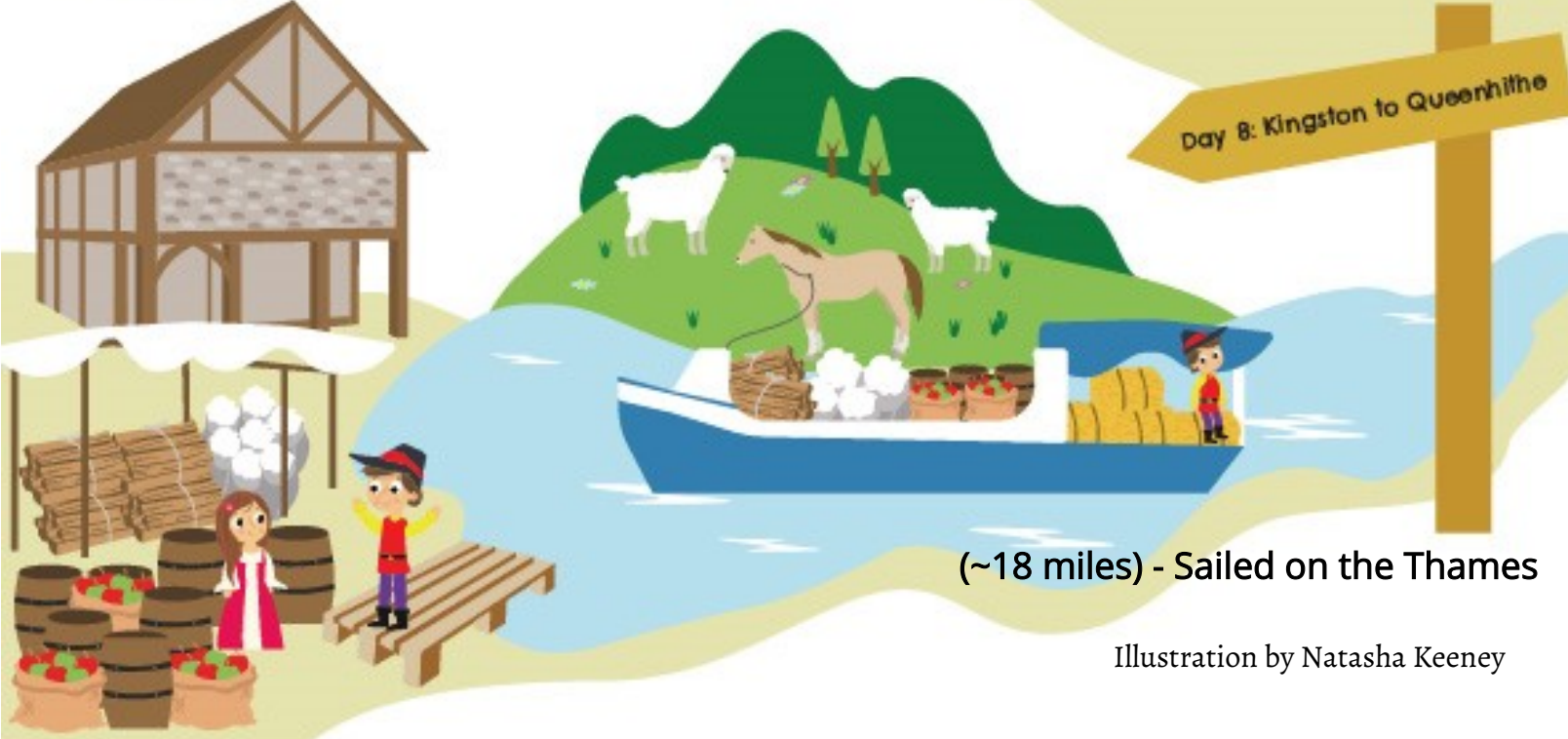
Day 6: Henley on Thames to Maidenhead

(~9 miles) - Walked along Medieval Roads



Day 7: Maidenhead to Kingston

(~24 miles) - Sailed on the Thames



Day 8: Kingston to Queenhithe

(~18 miles) - Sailed on the Thames

Day One

Pauntley to Gloucester (~11 miles) - Walked along an old Roman Road

Cirencester was a major settlement for the Romans, so the road network in the surrounding area was well established,.

Day Two

Gloucester to Cirencester (~19 miles) - Walked along an old Roman Road

We compared a modern day map with John Speeds map of Gloucester (created in 1611) and found that many of the roads are still the same. The 'London Road' heads out of Gloucester towards Cirencester. We also found this road on the Roman Road map. Nowadays, it's known as the A417.

Day Three

Cirencester to Lechlade on Thames (~14 miles) - Walked along a Medieval Road

The A417 continues out of Cirencester directly to Lechlade, and parts of it are still called London Road today. At the time Dick made his journey, Lechlade was a major dwelling with a bridge and a Priory. The Trout Inn is the only part of the Priory complex that still remains. Perhaps Dick stayed there!

Day Four

Lechlade on Thames to Abingdon (~20 miles) - Walked along a Medieval Road

Dick continued to follow the A417 to Faringdon. We believe he then turned left, along a road still called London Street today, which took him to Abindgon. This is the route featured on Ogilby's Strip map of 1675 too. Abingdon was a major settlement thanks, in part, to it's Priory.

Day Five

Abingdon to Henley on Thames (~21 miles) - Walked along Medieval Roads

Little of the original road structure remains in these areas, but the roads named after their destination still exist i.e. Abingdon Road. Once again, we turned to Ogilvy's strip map, which indicates Henley as a stop.

Day Six

Henley on Thames to Maidenhead (~9 miles) - Walked along Medieval Roads

Dick likely travelled along the road still known today as The Henley Road to arrive in Maidenhead. He will have sought passage on a goods barge destined for London. Maidenhead was a major trading town thanks to its Bridge. It was also safer to travel by river.

Day Seven

Maidenhead to Kingston Upon Thames (~24 miles) - Sailed on the Thames

The barges were pulled by horses, and the distance between Maidenhead and London is too far for them to walk in a single day. Kingston is approx. half way between Maidenhead and London, and that time was a substantial trading hub because of the bridge and the river. It is most likely that Dick stayed in Kingston for the night.

Day Eight

Kingston Upon Thames to Queenhithe (~18 miles) - Sailed on the Thames

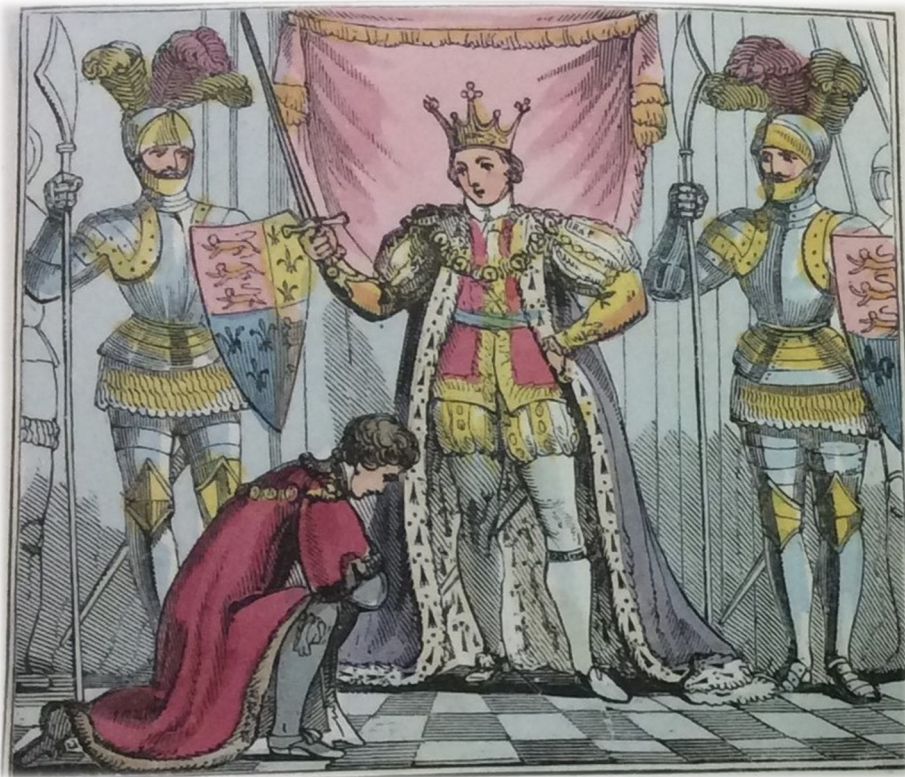
Queenhithe was the major goods dock on the Thames just by London Bridge. Dick could have alighted there and easily walked up to the Mercers district on Cheapside, ready to start his apprenticeship.

If you'd like to read more about Dick's journey to London they you can download our full findings on our website.

As a Mercer & a Moneylender

The first record of Dick Whittington as a Mercer is in 1379, when he contributed five marks towards a civic gift to the nobles of the realm. By 1388 he was a major supplier to the royal court, and by 1389 he was selling his wares to King Richard II. The pattern continued, with Dick recorded as supplying mercery to Henry IV's great wardrobe and for the marriages of Henry IV's daughters, Blanche and Philippa⁷.

His close connections with wealthy customers left him in an advantageous position as a money lender. He is recorded as lending to the crown on nearly sixty occasions. He also lent money to individuals. He kept his capital liquid rather than investing it into a large estate which meant that he was able to make consistently large loans over a sustained period of time⁷.



During the reign of Edward III, it is probable that he also engaged in trade with Italy in the rapidly expanding export of English woollen cloth. He is known to have collected on royal debts via wool subsidies and served as a collector of the wool subsidies in all of London twice between 1401 and 1410, which would have been very lucrative indeed⁷.

His professional interests diversified over time, and in the last decade of his life he enacted fewer sales and took on fewer apprentices, but he continued to import linens and deal in mercery until the end⁷.

7. Sutton A.F. 'Whittington, Richard [Dick]', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 1st September 2017

As a Statesmen

As Dick climbed the ranks of the social echelon, so he also furthered a successful civic career. Below is a list of notable offices held⁷.

1384 to 1393	Common Councilman for Coleman Street Ward
1393 to 1397	Alderman of Broad Street
1393	Sheriff of London
1395	Warden of the Mercers Company
1397	Lord Mayor of London (appointed by Richard II)
1397	Lord Mayor of London (via election)
1399 to 1400	Member of Henry IV's first council
1401 to 1402	Warden of the Mercers Company
1405 to 1423	Mayor of the staple of Westminster
1406 to 1413	Mayor of the Calais staple
1406	Lord Mayor of London (via election)
1408 to 1409	Warden of the Mercers company
1416 to 1417	MP for the city
1419	Lord Mayor of London (via election)
1421	Judge in Ursury Trials, London

Love and Marriage

Dick Whittington married Alice Fitwarin around 1402. He bought a large house in The Royal, next to the church of St Michael Paternoster Royal where they lived together. They had no children⁷.

Just eight years later, Alice died. At that time, it would have been customary for a man of Dick's standing to take another wife, but he died a widower. Immediately after her death, his demeanour appears to have changed. He took a break from civic life and wound down the elements of his business that would have involved him investing time in work colleagues. A man of his standing would have been expected to take another wife, yet there is no evidence of there having been anyone else.

The evidence tends towards the conclusion that he was a man who waited a relatively long time to find the love of his life, and was heartbroken when he lost her.

He paid for the rebuilding of the church St Michael Paternoster Royal as a final resting place for himself and Alice. It burned to the ground during the great fire of London and was rebuilt by Sir Christopher Wren. Although the tomb is lost, there is a stained glass window commemorating his direct link to the church.

His Legacy

During his lifetime Dick Whittington gave to good causes and set up some of his own. Some of those documented causes include a library at Greyfriars, a refuge for unmarried mothers and more unusually a longhouse which included the largest provision of public lavatories at that time, and an almshouse⁷.

His life and work were given in service of the people of London, and so it seems fitting that he decided to leave his entire fortune to charity. These included rebuilding Newgate Prison, rebuilding the south wall of St Bartholomew's Hospital, establishing a library at the Guildhall and installing public fountains in the city⁷.

The fruits of his generosity still linger, with many of the institutions he founded or supported still running today. It was this final act of extreme munificence that gave rise to the legend of Dick Whittington. By the early seventeenth century the story of the orphan boy Whittington from Gloucester who came to London and made good was being circulated. A poor kitchen Scullion, he was befriended by the daughter of the master of the house, Alice Fitzwarren, but was plagued in his attic bedroom by rats and mice. He bought himself a cat who drove the vermin away. Alderman Fitzwarren offered all of his servants the opportunity to contribute to his trading ship, The Unicorn, but the only thing Dick could offer was his cat. When the Unicorn docked in North Africa, the King their bought the cat for 10 times more than the all the other merchandise to solve his rat problem. Dick had lost faith in the Aldermans return and was leaving for Gloucestershire, but as he walked over Highgate hill the Bow Bells called him back. He returned to discover that The Unicorn had docked and that he was a rich man.

And the cat...?

It is believed that the feline legend originates from the famous picture of him seen holding a cat. Turns out the cat was added later, and he was originally holding a skull!

