

Understand London

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Is London crippled by recession, riding an Olympic wave or a bit of both?

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What did the Romans ever do for us? Gave us London for starters.

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London has served as the iconic backdrop to an array of films and boasts a thriving media industry.

London Today

Since scooping its bid to host the 2012 Olympic Games, London has attracted a staggering amount of attention and scrutiny from talking heads, the media and the chattering classes. The city has been appraised, reappraised, examined and re-examined against a raft of expectations that would capsize a lesser city, especially one in the grip of recession. Yet London has reaffirmed itself as a capital of transformative ideas, cultural dynamism and staying power.

Best on Film

Withnail & I (1986) Cult black comedy about two unemployed actors in 1969 Camden.

Love Actually (2003) Saccharine romantic comedy with great shots of town.

An American Werewolf in London (1981) Classic offbeat horror comedy.

Notting Hill (1999) Sappy romcom with Hugh Grant and Julia Roberts in an atypically all-white Notting Hill.

Sliding Doors (1998) Gwyneth Paltrow stars in classic 'What if?' alternate-history drama.

Best in Print

London Fields (Martin Amis; 1989) Gripping, dark postmodern study of London lowlife.

Journal of the Plague Year (Daniel Defoe; 1722) Defoe's classic reconstruction of the Great Plague of 1665.

London: The Biography (Peter Ackroyd; 2001) Marvellously researched and well-written brick of a book.

Oliver Twist (Charles Dickens; 1837) Unforgettable characters and a vivid portrayal of Victorian London seen through the eyes of a hapless orphan.

Brick Lane (Monica Ali; 2003) A tale of an arranged marriage in London's Bangladeshi community.

The Olympic Games Effect

The recession may have double-dipped its way across the cityscape, leaving stalled projects and the occasionally immobile crane in its wake, but the Olympic project has proceeded to plan, reshaping parts of the East End of London, expanding the city's transport network, rejuvenating squares and parks and adding a bit of fizz to even the most remote of urban backwaters. A concurrent, unplanned economy has coalesced around the big occasion, unleashing new hotels, restaurants, bars and vast fleets of public bicycles onto the roads of a city preparing to entertain the world, when it comes to town.

Olympic Games work projects are notorious poisoned chalices, but London put its money on the massive regeneration of a derelict, polluted and neglected part of town, forging an emphasis on sustainability, the creation of wildlife and wetland habitats and affordable housing. To be renamed the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park in 2013, the Olympic Park (p222) is designed to grow and flourish as soon as the last athlete takes his or her bow in 2012. It's an ambitious and bold long-term vision that will take decades to fully mature.

Economic Blues

The West's most crippling recession since the Great one of the 1930s has naturally promoted caution over risk-taking, but optimists say London may still emerge more even-keeled in the process. The UK is on the economic ropes but London is seemingly driven by its own reserves of economic vitality, given an extra shot of adrenaline by the approaching 2012 Games.

The property market – badly buffeted by the economic cyclone – has proved more resilient in London than many other parts of the UK. Parts of London seem to write their own economic laws, with property prices in many boroughs rising or staying level as the rest of

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