Have you ever crossed Westminster Bridge?

If you have crossed it in a tram or bus you probably got little chance to see any of the many things that are worth stopping to see from there. If you have crossed it on foot you have probably gone at the speed of the rest of the walkers in order not to get jostled by people overtaking you.

What you should do is to get up early one September morning, and just stand on the bridge and watch the sun rise over the river and the houses before the hum of traffic and the crowds get in the way of your seeing what there is to see and hearing what there is to hear.

William Wordsworth, the poet, saw London in this way early one September morning about 140 years ago, and he
was so startled by the beauty of what he saw that he com-
posed this sonnet about it:

_Earth has not anything to show more fair:_
_Dull would he be of soul who could pass by_
_A sight so touching in its majesty:_
_This city now doth like a garment wear_
_The beauty of the morning; silent, bare,_
_Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples lie_
_Open unto the fields, and to the sky;_
_All bright and glittering in the smokeless air._
_Never did sun more beautifully steep_
_In his first splendour valley, rock, or hill;_
_Ne'er saw I, never felt, a calm so deep!_
_The river glideth at his own sweet will:_
_Dear God! The very houses seem asleep;_
_And all that mighty heart is lying still!

This very high praise is all the more remarkable coming
as it did from a poet who found his inspiration almost
entirely in the remote hills and rivers of the Lake District.

He was not in the least like his friend Charles Lamb,
who was never happy away from the street lamps and
bustle of the busy London streets.

And yet this country lover could say of London

_Earth has not anything to show more fair._

It was, of course, a very different London from the
London that you and I see from Westminster Bridge.

In the first place he talks about the smokeless air, and
in spite of the coming of electricity one of London’s main
problems to-day is to reduce the amount of smoke in the
air.

The buildings which were not there in Wordsworth’s
time, the Houses of Parliament, for instance, still stand
County Hall: the seat of London’s Government to-day
One of London’s loveliest sights—the Battersea Power Station
open to the sky, but it is no longer easy to see any fields from Westminster Bridge.

But one curious thing you will notice if you stand on the bridge on any early morning when the sun is just beginning to lighten up the walls and roof-tops. It does seem in its quietness unexpectedly countrified.

There is width and space and plenty of room to breathe. That of course is partly due to the great breadth of the Thames just here. A river always has a country atmosphere about it and the new buildings along the north and south banks add to its majesty. Between Shell-Mex House and Battersea Power Station, two excellent examples of the simple grandeur of modern architecture, you will see not only in the Southern Railway Depot, W. H. Smith and Sons, and the L.C.C. Fire Brigade Headquarters, but also and most of all in the crescent-shaped County Hall, the seat of London’s government, buildings which add very considerably to the beauty of the scene.

If what you saw from here were the whole of London nobody could deny its claim to be the fairest city in the world.

But a contemporary of William Wordsworth, one William Cobbett, saw another London, which so disgusted him by its ugliness that he christened it the Great Wen, or Wart.

And it is a great Wen in so far as it has grown without being properly shaped. It sprawled over the country places that had once been sporting Marylebone and isolated Islington, where men went to shoot game, and cattle grazed in peace.

Some cities are planned before being built. All the streets and avenues of Washington, for example, irradiate from the Capitol (the American House of Parliament), like the spokes of a bicycle wheel from its axis.

But London “just grewed”, like Topsy.
The result is that it is very difficult for strangers to find their way about.

One very observant foreigner has described London as “a shapeless mass dumped down as circumstances dictated according to the lie of the country, the biggest port and biggest business centre in existence, a gigantic pleasure resort, the city of the richest and of the poorest of the poor, the homes of all nations, full of unspeakable monotony and unbelievable variety”.

You may very well wonder why this great unwieldy mass which sprawls over six counties should have grown just here, and equally wonder why it has become the greatest city in the world.

Before the Romans came London was a marshy tract merging into a primeval forest, but under their rule it rose within a very short time to be a flourishing trading centre which, after its destruction by Boadicea, was soon rebuilt and fortified by a strong wall, the remains of which you can still see.

When the Romans left in A.D. 410 London slipped back into decay. Its streets were deserted for over a hundred years, but by the beginning of the seventh century the ancient bishopric was revived as the result of the visit of St Augustine.

The Abbey of Westminster was founded in the eighth century in the Isle of Thorney, a long way out of London, and rebuilt by King Edward the Confessor, who also built himself a palace close by.

William the Conqueror had himself crowned in this Abbey and lived in this Palace.

He then built the White Tower, the heart of the present Tower, to remind the citizens of London of his presence and power, but he had the wisdom also to please them by giving them a charter of liberties.
So during the Middle Ages London became rich and important and overflowed beyond the Roman and Norman walls and gates to new gates and bars in Temple Bar and Holborn Bar.

Westminster also grew more important after Henry II fixed the Law Courts there.

Noblemen built houses along the south side of the Strand and in Westminster, and very soon the richer merchants followed their example.

Both Elizabeth and James I tried to stop further encroachments on London’s countryside without much avail, though St Martin’s and St Giles both remained in the fields for a long time.

Then, as the result of the Plague and Fire, London had to be rebuilt, and a displaced population found accommodation outside, and the richer merchants began to build country houses in the tiny villages of St Pancras, Stepney, Islington, and so on.

Then the building in the late eighteenth century of Westminster and Blackfriars Bridges led to the development of the south side of the river.

More than one-fifth of all the people in England and Wales live in London.

The reason for its popularity is that, owing to the convenience of its position as a port, it has become the market town of the world. The feature you notice least, its docks, is the feature that gives London its industrial pre-eminence.

The river remained London’s highway for many centuries, and in Shakespeare’s time all the theatres were huddled together along the south bank at Southwark.

In Stuart times there were half a million inhabitants and it had reached a stage where growth was checked by the difficulty of supplying fresh food and horse-fodder from the surrounding country and by the difficulty of
getting good drinking-water. The water from the streams of Tyburn and Fleet was so bad that it only served to spread the plague.

In 1613 the “New River” was constructed to bring the clear chalk water from Hertfordshire. It wasn’t until much later that they learnt to bore through the London clay to the chalk beneath that now produces London’s excellent drinking-water.

The rich built mansions along all the river banks, as the river was the only link with London, the roads being impassable in winter owing to the sodden London clay.

Then came the turnpikes and the improvements of Telford and McAdam which made transport easy, and soon merchants began to drive daily from their suburban homes to their work in the city.

Buildings spread from the gravel terraces to the damp London clay north of the Marylebone and Euston roads. There was an attempt to plan out certain western suburbs in Belgravia and Bloomsbury in squares and wide streets.

The royal parks, Hyde Park, Green Park and St James’s Park, formed the western limit of building until George IV’s reign. Beyond them the West Bourne flowed across the wet fields. Then the architect Cubitt discovered that the clay was only a thin sheet covering an older bed of gravel, so he cleverly peeled off the silt, and turned it into bricks for houses, which he built on the gravel that lay below. This accounts for Regent Street, Portland Place, Trafalgar Square and adjacent streets.

The east end was, however, left to sprawl as it liked all over the low-lying marshes round the newly constructed docks, and on the south side only the Embankments saved the crowded areas of Lambeth Marsh from being flooded.

Then came the railways, enlarging the rim of the circumference of accessibility very considerably, reducing
Old County Hall: the seat of London’s Government yesterday
The men who first governed London. A cartoon of the first meeting of the L.C.C., February 1899.