



EAST LONDON HISTORY SOCIETY
BULLETIN

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JUNE, 1972.

EDITORIAL

The Society is very grateful to the Librarian of Hackney and his colleagues for having "taken over" the Bulletin for the March issue which was most interesting and made a refreshing break.

Despite the small number of workers, the Society continues to make its impact in all relevant fields. Through Mr. Royden's intermediary, there has been a walk along the Bow boundary, a visit to Abbey Mills Pumping Station and the West Ham Pumping Station, visits to the West India and Millwall Docks, a Canal walk from Bow to Waltham Abbey, a coach tour to the British Waterways Museum at Stoke Bruerne and a visit to the London Hydraulic Company's Wapping Pumping Station. Mr. French led a tour of East London's Ancient Religious Houses, and a visit to the Ratcliff Glassworks. Miss Sansom arranged a visit to Anglesey Abbey and Cambridge. We would like to have seen a few more members at these visits, and particularly at the Society's lecture evenings which are becoming much more difficult to arrange. It is disappointing for a top speaker who has many demands on his time to come to East London and find an audience of twenty or so. Every member should therefore make a point of coming to at least one of the evenings shown in the programme for the forthcoming season, and possibly bring one or two friends.

The Society continues to be involved in local Planning and Conservation. It has given assistance to local exhibitions and archaeological "digs", also talks on East London to other historical societies, Round Table, etc. We could be a little more active if one or two more members could assist with recordings, administration, etc.

The death occurred last month of Mrs. Florence Olley, known to thousands of East Londoners for her "eel and pie" shop in Canning Town's Rathbone Market which she ran for over fifty years. Like many other East London traders, she found time in a very busy life to give a helping hand to those in need. In East London generally, the old "eel and pie" shop has given way to the cafe and discotheque - the rush and pressure is replacing the personal touch with the impersonal. We find hardly time to reflect upon the contribution to local development and character many of these old traders made.

Since our last issue, another group burial (Roman) has been found at Old Ford, on McInerney's building site near Armour Road. In a stone coffin, two skeletons were found, one male and one female.

The closure of docks and wharves as well as East London factories, has emphasised the need for preserving certain types of old equipment and machinery. If you know of any factories, machine shops, etc. which possess early specimens of gear or machinery, the Committee would be pleased to have particulars.

The Annual General Meeting will be held at Queen Mary College on Wednesday, 18th October, 1972, and after the business formalities, there will be a members evening. The Annual Lecture will be at Bancroft Road Library on Wednesday, November 8th, when we shall have the pleasure of a distinguished speaker on the River Thames. There will be an exhibition at the Library on the Thames through the ages, concurrently with this talk. Enter these two dates in your Diary before you forget!

Have a good holiday!

A.H.F.

THE STORY OF A LONDON DOCK.

The St. Katherine Dock was opened on October 25th 1828. This was a joyous occasion and a big crowd of spectators dressed in their Sunday-best gathered on the quays to watch the ceremony. Flags and bunting fluttered in the breeze, and there were brass bands and bugles, as well as guns to fire a salute. At last the great moment came when the first ship to enter the new dock slid slowly in through the dock gates. She was a 516-ton East Indiaman called "Elizabeth" whose owner was Mr. Samuel Soanes, a rope-maker and ship-owner. Very handsome "Elizabeth" looked, dressed over-all with all her yards manned. This happy scene has been commemorated in a fine painting by William Huggins, now in the collection of the Port of London Authority,

The first stone of the new dock had been laid on May 2, 1827, only 18 months before the opening, but there had been many difficulties to overcome before the project could be put in hand. Although the Pool of London had been used as a trading port for 2,000 years, the use of the docks for the loading and unloading of merchandise was a new departure. Until the beginning of the 19th century all the ships that carried London's seaborne merchandise were moored in the deep-water Pool below London Bridge and the goods were ferried by barge and wherry to and from the quays and warehouses of the City. By this time London's sea-trade had grown to such proportions and the river was so cluttered with ships that stagnation seemed inevitable.

Even more serious was the loss of goods by theft. There was pilfering from the piles of merchandise lying on the quays and at night gangs of pirates would cut loose the loaded lighters, take them ashore and strip them of their contents. The only answer to the problem was to build enclosed docks where ships could unload without interference. The West Indian Docks, which were opened in 1802, were the first to be built for this purpose. Other docks followed, but they did little to ease the congestion in the river. The number of ships moored in the Thames in 1808 was 8,000, and by 1824 this had increased to 15,913.

A group of City merchants and seamen felt there was a need for a new dock hard by Tower Bridge, which would have easy access to the City. They formed a private company, the St. Katherine Dock Company, and they planned to build their dock on 23 acres of land between the Tower and the London Dock. It was to be smaller than the other recently-constructed docks and would have warehouses designed to house the more valuable cargoes such as indigo, opium, marble, tortoise-shell and scent.

The warehouses were to be built at the water's edge so that the cargoes could be unloaded into them, instead of first being stowed on an open quay. On the piece of land they intended to use stood St. Katherine's Hospital, a chapel, a brewery and 1,100 houses, and an artificial creek that was the private landing-place for the Hospital.

There was, as can be imagined, much opposition to the suggested dock scheme. The London Dock Company made the point that the present warehouses were not full. What was more, the river would have to be cleared of lighters at the entrance of the new dock. But the greatest opposition came from the ancient foundation of St. Katherine. The founder of the Hospital was Queen Matilda, the wife of King Stephen, who had dedicated it in 1148 to two of her children who died in infancy. Queen Philippa, wife of Edward III, founded a chantry and a chapel was built. The foundation was free from the controls of any religious order, and the Queen (or Queen-Mother, for she held the office for life) was the Patron.

It is not difficult to imagine how sentiment and public interest in the ancient foundation of St. Katherine was employed by the opponents to the dock scheme.

But it was all to no avail. The ancient quarters near the river were too attractive to be resisted and the opposition was silenced by the promoters of the new dock coming to terms with the trustees of the St.Katherine Foundation. They gave them substantial financial compensation and the Crown made a grant of land in Regents Park on which the Foundation was re-established. Clauses of protection were drawn up for landlords, and the rights of the Queen and the Master and Brothers of St.Katherine were specially preserved. The heirs of persons whose monuments were in the church were given grants for their removal, and arrangements were made for their "dead" to be re-interred.

The only people who received no help were the portenants who lived in the squalid houses of the neighbourhood; they had to rehouse themselves as best they could. Some indication of the sort of district in which they had lived can be gained from the names of the thoroughfares. There was Dark Entry, Cats Hole, Shovel Alley and Pillory Lane. The dock promoters may have destroyed a historical edifice and caused much human suffering, but at least they achieved a large-scale slum clearance. The last service was held in St.Katherine's church on October 30, 1825, and work on the dock started 18 months later.

The estimated cost of St.Katherine's Dock was £1,352,752, but enthusiasm for the scheme was such that £1,089,600 was subscribed by people connected with London commerce and shipping before the application had been made to Parliament. The Royal assent to the Bill was given on January 10, 1825, and the Company appointed Mr. Tooke as Chairman and Mr. John Hall as Secretary. Mr. Philip Hardwick was the architect and John Telford the engineer appointed to carry out the work, which proceeded at a tremendous pace. Excavated soil was taken by barge to fill up disused reservoirs at Chelsea and Millbank.

When work had been proceeding for six months there came a serious setback. Owing to an exceptionally high tide backed by strong northerly winds, the Thames overflowed her banks and flooded the bed dug for the foundations of the dock. In some places the water was 27 ft. deep. However, gangs of men worked round the clock making dams and at the end of a week normal work was resumed.

When the dock was completed some of the outstanding features were the elegance of the design and the high standard of workmanship. The columns supporting the walls of the warehouses at the water's edge were beautifully proportioned with Doric capitals forming a handsome colonnade. It was reckoned that the dock would accommodate about 1,400 merchant ships annually. Owing to the enterprise and good management of the Secretary, ships were diverted from the other docks and the company that had paid a dividend of 4 per cent while the dock was being built now paid 5 per cent.

In 1830 a spacious wharf was built along 170 ft. of the dock river front, where steamer passengers could embark in safety and comfort. At low tide a platform was constructed in front of the wharf. Previously all passengers using river steamers had to be ferried out in wherries. Fifteen years later the New Foreign Baggage Warehouse, where passengers travelling to and from the Continent could wait in comfort to have their baggage cleared, was built with the Commissioners of Customs. It was the first of its kind to be built on the river. The new building had every modern convenience, being "well warmed, ventilated and brilliantly lit with gas".

The St.Katherine's Dock had been built for all time for it had not been possible for the promoters to foresee the rigid changes that were to take place in the 19th-century. In 1815 the average size of merchant ships was 500 tons, and the St. Katherine Dock had been built to take ships of 1,000 tons. But by the end of the century ships of 7,000 tons were using the Port of London. More up-to-date docks, linked with the railways were built. In 1864 it was evident that something drastic had to be done

and the St.Katherine Dock Co. merged with London Dock Co. and in that same year came amalgamation with the newly equipped Victoria Dock Company. These mergers relieved the smaller docks but led to harsher treatment of dock labourers to meet the fierce competition and public demand for cheap services; reduction of dockers wages became inevitable. The first dockers' strike occurred in 1871, and in 1889 all shipping was paralysed by a four-months stoppage.

A Royal Commission was appointed to inquire into the administration of the Port of London in 1900, the outcome of which was the formation of the Port of London Authority, a self-governing public trust that in 1909 took over the entire ownership of all dock companies.

As the years went by, St.Katherine's Dock, built for sailing ships, became an uneconomic proposition, and after the Second World War it was not considered worth repairing all the bomb damage to warehouses. In 1966 only barge traffic used the dock. The Port of London Authority eventually decided to close it and sell the whole property to the Greater London Council for the sum of £1,870,000. Surprisingly this put 2,000 men temporarily out of work.

In 1968 the disused dock came briefly back into the limelight quite literally. It was used in the making of the film of the Battle of Britain. A scene from the Blitz was re-enacted when some damaged warehouses were set on fire and a veteran fire-float was used to extinguish the flames.

Celia Davies.

Some light on Disappearing Street Name-Plates.

Dear Editor,

One morning, some two weeks ago, passing a large early-Victorian house under demolition at the corner of Clark Street and Ford Square (Bedford Square), on an impulse I decided to call on the site foreman to ask if he would sell me the 'Clark Street' name-plate which the workmen undertaking the demolition had almost reached. This name-plate was one of the earliest types I had seen in Tower Hamlets and I had photographed it on a number of occasions. I found the foreman and offered him 50p or even £1 if he would sell it to me, telling him I wished to donate it to our local museum. He laughingly said "You must be joking, mate - that's a bit of old London and worth much more" and refused to tell me who his prospective buyers were. Pressing him still further, he reluctantly admitted that his buyers were antique dealers and I could not get any further information from him. This was part of his "perks" and he was not going to budge.

As many of us have suspected, there is a growing antique market in boundary plates, street name-plates, insurance plates, and similar items of London interest, but this was my first direct contact with the individuals involved. A number of our most active members have been perturbed in the past year or two by the disappearance (without trace) of many interesting and valuable boundary plates, which have added character and not a little spice to many a drab street or lane. Discussions have taken place from time to time by Society members concerned with this problem, and it was generally agreed that a much stricter vigilance should be kept on threatened boundary plates, etc. in areas due for demolition. I would appeal to members who know of any unusual plates or stones, which look as if they may disappear in the near future owing to rebuilding, to contact the Chairman or Committee members.

Yours faithfully,

DAVID GRANICK

SOME POPLAR CHARITIES.

In the year 1686, Mrs. Hester Hawes (or Haines) erected some almshouses in Bow Lane, a short distance from Poplar High Street, for the occupation of "six of ye most antient poore women (widows or maids) of ye hamblett of Poplar", and endowed them with £9 per annum for ever. The houses were still in existence at the end of the last century, the pensions being paid by the heirs of John Stock.

Sir H. Johnson, a former proprietor of Blackwall Yard, left, on his decease in 1680, the sum of £300 for the erection of "six good and substantial tenements, each tenement to contain two rooms, with a chimney in each room". The dwellings were to be set apart for the occupation of "poore shipp-carpenters" who had attained the age of "three-score years or more" and who had laboured for their living in Blackwall Yard. The occupiers were to be presented annually with a blue gown, with the donor's coat-of-arms thereon, and were to receive a weekly allowance of 2/6d and an additional "half-a-crown at Christmas-time". In deference to the deceased's request, the houses were erected in a thoroughfare called "Globe-Yard", but the Earl of Stafford who married Sir Henry Johnson's eldest daughter, and became the possessor of the estate in which the charity was situated, neglected to pay the poor people their pensions. In the year 1722 the Earl disposed of the estate, and the parishioners took steps to "establish" the charity. Meetings were held, the matter was represented to the Earl's successor, and eventually the inhabitants succeeded in their effort. Since that time the pensions have been regularly paid by each successive owner of Blackwall Yard, and at the present time, Messrs. Green being proprietors of the estate, the poor persons periodically receive the amount provided by Sir Henry Johnson's philanthropy. Around 1830 the old buildings were demolished and rebuilt.

John Tell Esq. by will dated 1742, caused almshouses to be erected at Blackwall for poor watermen who had served their apprenticeship in the hamlet. The recipients of this charity were to be nominated by the minister of the place, or by the churchwardens and overseers. Mr. Tell left no endowment for the property, but made provision by which £3 per annum is secured to keep the almshouses in repair.

There have been numerous bequests of sums of money to be distributed annually in bread to the poor of the parish. Among these is one by John Perry Esq. of Blackwall, who, by his will dated 1772, left the sum of £200 per annum "to be given in bread to the poor of the hamlet"; and, in 1805, John Perry Esq. son of the former, added to his father's bequest the sum of £218, to be devoted to the same purpose.

A somewhat novel circumstance is recorded to have taken place at a meeting of the inhabitants held in 1737. It appeared that the rate-collectors had "fraudulently and unwarrantably collected the sum of £350" odd from the property owners of the hamlet, and it was therefore ordered that the sum of £44. 16. 8d. should be paid into the hands of the senior churchwarden, John Pharaoh Esq. for the use of the hamlet, with instructions that he and the succeeding churchwardens should "for ever distribute the sum of 12d weekly in 2d loaves" to six poor persons residing in the hamlet.

Alfred Simmons, 1870.

GARDINER'S CORNER

Gardiner's Corner has gone. Gutted by fire on the 22nd May 1972 it was within 24 hours just a heap of rubble resembling the bomb-sites of which, alas, East London still shows far too many.

Yet it is fitting that Gardiner's, whose familiar clock tower looked down on the hay-market, the tram terminus and the stalls each side of Aldgate High

Street, and stood sentinel as a Gateway to East-London for a century, should have gone out in a blaze of glory, hitting the headlines and watched by thousands of East Londoners, rather than that, stone by stone, it should have slipped away silently and unobserved. For did not this edifice beckon Jew and Gentile alike to the hospitality of East London and gaze down on monarchs in state as they rode past on their rare East End visits?

Gardiner's was due for demolition. It became isolated by the Aldgate road development and trade had dwindled. But it was more than a building - it was a tradition. With a dozen or more marine clothiers at the western end of Commercial Road all of whom gradually disappeared leaving Gardiner's supreme, it served the seafaring community with anything from a galley-boy's swab to a Master Mariner's gold-braid cap. Here were all the knick-knacks for which a sailor's advance-note could be exchanged. It was a name as familiar to seamen as "Aggie Weston's" and "The Pompey Drag". From Shanghai to Honolulu many could direct you to Gardiner's Corner who had never heard of Downing Street.

The name will linger on for a further generation and will then pass into the oblivion of so many of East London's seafaring traditions.

A.H.F.

BETHNALL HOUSE

It is difficult to realise that only three or four generations ago Bethnal Green was a piece of rural England. Its very name is itself a page of history. For "Bethnal" was originally "Blithenhale" - which is Anglo-Saxon for "Pleasant Nook". Up till the 18th century it was a typically English village. If one could conjure away the shops and houses along a narrow strip stretching from Old Ford Road to Cleveland Street, and substitute grass, orchards and full-grown trees, one would have a picture of the original 'Green'. About this green stood, in fraternal village fashion, the residential centre of the community. Round about were broad pastures, winding lanes, scattered farms and cottages, and the homes of the well-to-do. Such was the original Bethnal Green, a snug village in the parish of Stepney, keeping its essential features until the last decades of the eighteenth century.

During the days of Queen Elizabeth a rich merchant named John Kirby decided to settle in the country. Those were days when there were built "many fair summer houses..... with towers, turrets and chimney pots" as John Stow says in his Survey of London. Just such a place did Kirby build, and it stood in Roman Road, almost opposite what is now Victoria Park Square, and within a stone's throw of St. John's Church. It seems to have been designed (to quote Stow again) "not so much for use or profits as for show and pleasure and betraying the vanities of men's minds". It was called Bethmall House, but was also variously known as "Kirby's Castle" or "The White House" and the cost of its erection is said to have impoverished the Owner.

In 1660 this "stately home of England" came into the possession of Sir William Rider, J.P., who is recorded as having obtained permission from the Lord of the Manor to drive his coach across Mile End Common on his way to Church. Among Rider's friends was Samuel Pepys, author of the immortal Diary. Pepys tells how during the Great Fire of London he grew so anxious as to the fate of his Diary that he packed it with other possessions on to a cart and fled the City. In too great a haste even to put on anything over his nightgown, he fought his way through the crowds of vehicles and refugees to Bethnal Green. On arriving he handed his literary masterpiece into the care of Rider.

Pepys gives us a tantalising glimpse into the life at Bethnall House

when he speaks of "a noble dinner, and a fine merry walk alone with the ladies in the garden, which is very pleasant" and he adds that the garden contained "the greatest quantity of strawberries I ever saw, and good".

Another famous man who lived for a time at Bethnall House was Sir Hugh Platt, the 16th century author. In one of his books he describes, with an illustration an ear of barley measuring 45 inches, which he had grown in Bethnal Green.

For 200 years or so Bethnall House, or more likely a pathetic relic of it, was used as a private asylum. At one time it was known as "Mr. Shaw's Madhouse". One of its most distinguished inmates was Alexander Cruden, whose "Complete Concordance of the Old and New Testaments" is a classic. Cruden's account of his incarceration makes horrifying reading. He was chained, handcuffed like a common galley-slave, and put in a straight-jacket. A gentle, noble soul, he passed much of his time in prayer, which brought him "such uncommon Peace and Security that Bethnall House was in some respects rather a Palace than a Prison". After ten weeks he escaped and fled across the fields by way of Mile End to Aldgate, and was later accorded full liberty by the Lord Mayor of London.

The last director of the Asylum was a Dr. Wills. In 1920 he removed his establishment to Salisbury, and the following year the house, together with its private land was acquired by the Bethnal Green Borough Council and engulfed in the housing estate which was opened in 1924. Among the buildings demolished, to make way for this estate, was the Red House, which stood a little to the North of the present Central Library. Many people will remember this handsome building; it is thought to have been an annexe (added perhaps in the eighteenth century) to the original Bethnall House.

Thus, mirrored in the story of a single house, we may see the unfolding evolution of Bethnal Green itself. What originally had beauty and dignity was put to debasement, and finally swept away as a casualty of Progress.

Stenley Snaith.

ADVERTISEMENT FROM "THE DAILY ADVERTISER"

"Valuable Farm, Live and Dead Stock, and fine Growing Crops.

To be sold by Auction by HINDLE and SON.

By Order of the Proprietor, on the Premises, near "The Three Colts", Old Ford Lane, on Thursday next, at Eleven o'clock.

A Valuable Leasehold Farm, comprising a substantial Dwelling-House, with every Conveniency for a large Family, lately thoroughly repaired, a Brewhouse, extensive Garden planted with Fruit-Trees, large Fish-pond well-stocked, an Orchard, and three small tenements, together with 60 acres of Meadow and Arable Land, in a Ring-Fence well inclosed, and in a high state of Cultivation, Stabling for 12 Horses, a large Barn, Granary, Hay-Barn, Cart-Sheds, Straw-Rooms, Cowhouse, etc. ten years unexpired of the Lease, subject to a very low Rent. At the same Time will be sold the Live and Dead Stock and Growing Crops on the said Farm, consisting of 23 acres of Rye, 16 acres of Turnips, 7 acres of Potatoes, 6 acres of Barley, 5 acres of Oats, 4 acres of Cabbage, 1 acre of Carrots, 6 useful Draught Horses, carts and Harness, Ploughs, Harrows, and other Farming Implements, about 20 loads of Spit Dung, etc. To be viewed three days preceding the sale, when Particulars and Catalogues may be had on the Premises; at the "Three Colts", in Grove-Street, Hackney; of Mr. Dell, Old Ford; the "Mermaid" Hackney, the "Swan" Clapton, the "Three Crowns" Stoke Newington, the "George and Vulture" Tottenham, and of Messrs. Hindle and Son, No. 60, Shoreditch."

August 7th 1795.

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THE MAYOR OF GARRETT

Following my recent note on the wedding at Shoreditch Church of Sir Jeffrey Dunstan (Bulletin, March 1972), a number of enquiries have been received concerning the origin of the title.

The following account is taken from the Shoreditch Herald and East London Rambler, No.3, July 1852:

"About 1750, several persons residing in that part of Wandsworth which adjoins Garrat Lane have formed a club not merely to eat and drink but to prevent encroachments being made on that part of the Common. As the members were mostly of the poorer classes, they agreed to contribute at every meeting a trifle in order to establish a fund for their collective right. The president was called the Mayor of the Club and after bringing a successful action against an encroachment he was known ever after as the Mayor of Garrat"

"Sir" Jeffrey was first discovered, a few days after his arrival on this earth, sleeping sweetly at the door of the Churchwarden of St. Dunstan-in-the-East, from which place he was carefully transplanted, we are told, to the workhouse where he remained until he was twelve years of age.

His "armorial bearings" consisted of four wigs - and a quart pot for his crest.

(The previously published account of the marriage of his daughter may be found in Sir William Musgrave's Biographica Adversaria).

S.C.T.

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COPY OF THE WORDING OF A MEMORIAL TO THE FRENCH REFUGEES
WHO SETTLED IN BETHNAL GREEN WHICH WAS AT ONE TIME DISPLAYED
IN ST. MATTHEW'S CHURCH.

"In the ground around this Church many of the French Refugees were buried who had fled from France when the Edict of Nantes was revoked (October 22nd 1685) by King Louis XIV. Most of those who settled here and in the surrounding districts were the silk weavers who have left for all time a memorable record of their famous and highly skilled craftsmanship. Among the best known of their hand-loom weaving were the Coronation robes of Queen Victoria; the silk for her Jubilee; the wedding-dress for Queen Mary; and the remarkable vestment woven in one piece for Pope Pius IX in 1870. Here they found a Home, an Apostolic Faith, and a resting place in death. R.I.P."

(Reproduced from memory in August 1934 by the Rev.W.B.Vaillant, the original memorial having been removed or otherwise lost sight of).

BOSWELL AND EAST LONDON.

"As the Spectator observes, one end of London is like a different country from the other in look and in manners. We ate an excellent breakfast at the Somerset Coffee-House. We turned down Gracechurch Street and went upon the top of London Bridge, from whence we viewed with a pleasing horror the rude and terrible appearance of the river, partly frozen up, partly covered with enormous shoals of floating ice which often crashed against each other.....We went half a mile beyond the turnpike at Whitechapel, which completed our course, and went into a little public house and drank some warm white wine with aromatic spices, pepper and cinnamon. We were pleased with the neat houses upon the road." 19th January 1763.