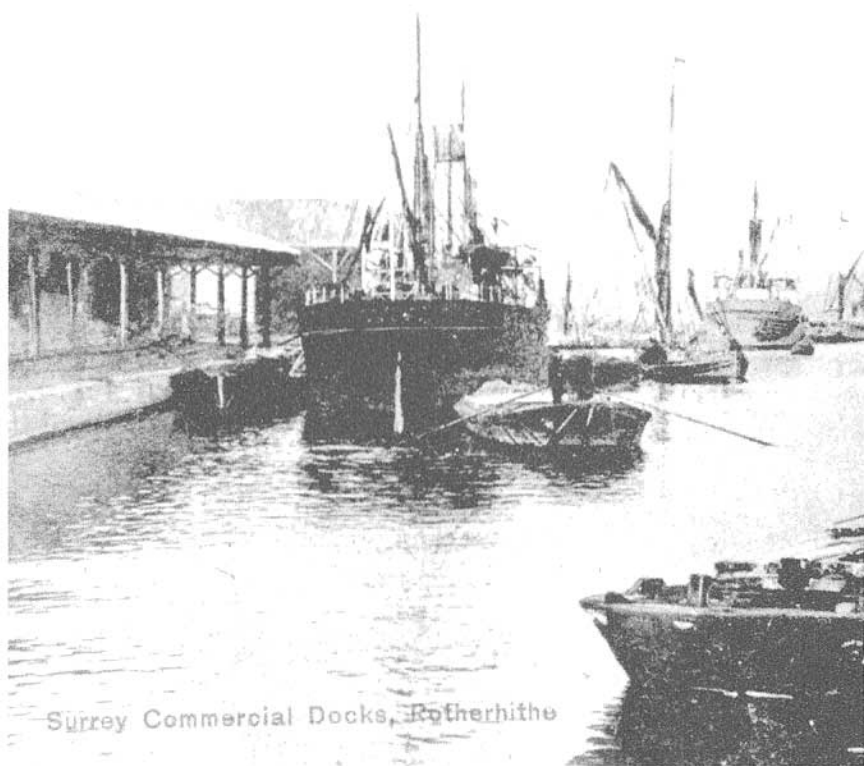


---

# **A SHORT HISTORY OF THE SURREY COMMERCIAL DOCKS**

**BY STUART RANKIN**



---

**ROTHERHITHE LOCAL HISTORY PAPER NO. 6**

---



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I first began writing a history of the Surrey Commercial Docks back in 1991, when I came to live in Rotherhithe. At that time, I had the offer of publication being sponsored by a property development company, and publication was intended for 1995, marking the Act of Parliament for building the Howland Great Wet Dock, and completion of the developer's plans. Some tens of thousands of words later, the property developer went bankrupt, I became more interested in Rotherhithe's shipbuilding history, life got in the way, and 1995 came and went. What I had written to date was duly cannibalised for various talks and articles, but still forms the basis for the present booklet. To anyone experiencing "deja vu" as a result, I can only apologise, but I have been asked several times to produce something on the Surrey Docks, and felt that the two significant anniversaries falling in 1999/2000 should not go uncommemorated.

It is surprising to me that no serious full length history of the Port of London has appeared since Sir Joseph Brodribb's monumental work in 1921, long out of print; if you can find it second hand (with all its plates) at under £130, then my advice is mortgage something and buy it - prices have increased by 50% in the past three years alone. Similarly, John Pudney's lighter, and more readable work of 1975 is not easy to find - I was able to buy my copy only a couple of years back, after keeping an eye open since 1991. Neither of them, in my opinion, do justice to the history of the "Surreys", concentrating on the more glamorous operations north of the Thames. If the present offering does a little to restore that balance, then the effort will have been worthwhile.

In the early stages of the research, I was fortunate in getting help from the London Docklands Development Corporation, who placed no restrictions upon me, save that I make clear that any opinions expressed were my own. Despite the demise of that organisation, I am happy to now fulfil that undertaking. Thanks are also due to: Bob Aspinall, Ron Crew, Cornelius Delay, Jim Hughes, The London Library, The Museum in Docklands Project, Diana Rimel, Edward Sargent, and Southwark Local Studies Library; to Mike Wilce, for upgrading my PC and peripherals and Malcolm Meachen, for the extended loan of a large computer monitor ("The Rotherhithe Imax!"), which has made production much easier. The illustrations are credited individually, unless items from the author's collection, except: inside front cover, courtesy of Harry Margary, inside back cover, LDDC; and the map on page 26, PLA. The cover illustration is from an old picture postcard. A select bibliography appears on page 36.

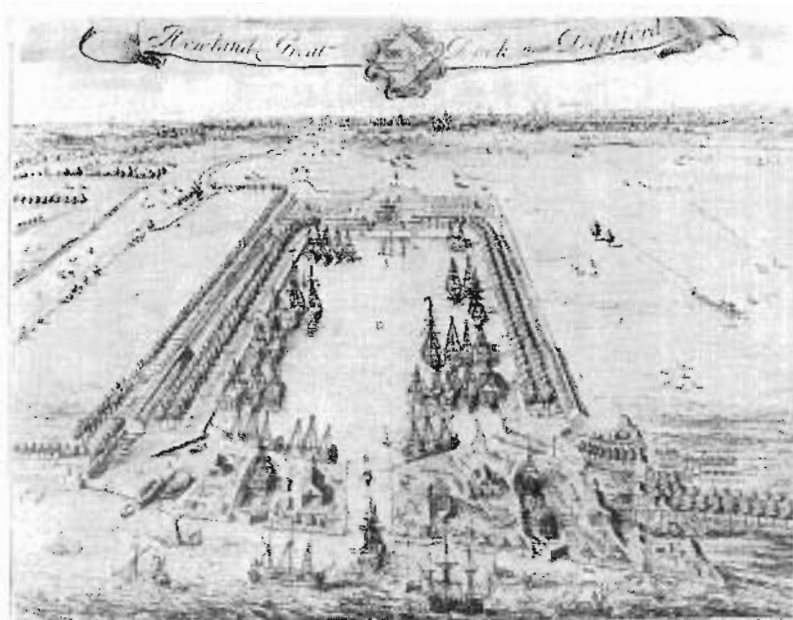
*Dedicated to Brian Hill;*

*If he had not invited me to visit Rotherhithe in 1990, when I was living and working in Yorkshire, I might never have discovered what a fascinating place it is, eventually moved to live here, - or written this booklet...*

*Stuart Rankin, Rotherhithe, July 1999*

## INTRODUCTION

Few districts of London have seen so many phases of change as the Rotherhithe peninsula - that area between Lower Road, and the sweeping curve of the Thames from the Lower Pool into Limehouse Reach. Lower Road got its name as it was originally the "Lower Road to Deptford" - thus called to distinguish it from what is now Rotherhithe Street, at one time the principal and safest land route from London Bridge to Deptford and Greenwich. An ancient milestone, giving the distance from London Bridge can still be seen built into the wall of the "Mayflower" pub. At the time of Rocque's 1747 map (inside front cover) this route had various names along different parts of its length, including Redriff Wall, Shipwright Street, Jamaica Street, Lavender Street, Queen Street and Trinity Street. Its course can be traced just inland from the river wall, sometimes detouring inland to allow space for drydocks and slipways. The map shows that there was a fringe of development along the river banks - ship and timber yards, with some housing. Rocque does not distinguish a windmill, near Cuckold's Point, known to have been here in 1684 and 1757 from other maps. There was also a small cluster of activity around the Howland Great Wet Dock (called Upper Wet Dock on the map, to distinguish it from the Wet Dock at Deptford), which had, in 1747, been in operation for nearly 50 years. The remainder of the area comprised streams feeding the mills, (just off the map, top left), market gardens and marshland.



### THE FIRST DOCK

The Howland Great Wet Dock (above), and adjacent estate, formed part of the dowry which Elizabeth Howland (aged 11) brought to her marriage (1695) with Wriothesley Russell (aged 14), heir to his grandfather, the Earl, later Duke, of Bedford. It was a remarkable match - not just because of the age of the bride and groom, but because it united one of the country's most prominent Whig families with that of a devious, arch old Tory. Both these young people had rich, powerful and manipulative mothers, and both had lost their fathers - Wriothesley's had been executed for alleged complicity in the Rye House Plot. The widow Lady Rachel Russell, was one of three daughters of the last Earl of Southampton, and inherited a third of his estate; Mrs. Elizabeth Howland, whose husband John had been a wealthy East India merchant in his own right, was a daughter of Sir Josiah Child, Governor, or Deputy Governor of the East India Company for lengthy periods. Some confusion has arisen over the years because of similar first names in different generations of the Howland family, so it is worth spending a little time to sort them out.

The Howland family first came to prominence towards the end of Queen Elizabeth's reign. Giles Howland began life as a draper, but he probably had other business interests because by 1599, he was a Knight, and had sufficient spare cash available to be among the founding subscribers of what was to become the East India Company. At around the same time, he also bought the Manor of Tooting Bec, which included the village of Streatham, and an old manor house called "Colebrand's" dating from 1394. He also bought a substantial area of land fronting the river at Rotherhithe. His son, John Howland I, became High Sheriff of Surrey, and around 1660, improved the Rotherhithe property by building a shipyard and drydock which was leased to Abraham Wells. John Howland I probably embarked the river frontage at the same time. The Howland family interest in the East India Company, and later in owning ships chartered to the Company, brought them into contact with Sir Josiah Child; John Howland I had a son, John Howland II, who was in due course married to Elizabeth Child.

She brought a considerable dowry to this marriage, owning shares in East India ships in her own right. One of the vessels she was interested in was part owned by the Earl of Bedford and this was the factor which brought the families together, both having a substantial financial stake in the East India trade. John Howland II died, a comparatively young man, after only five years of marriage. His only surviving child was a girl, called Elizabeth after her mother. The two formidable widows, Russell and Howland, combined their political and financial influence to secure an Act of Parliament (1695/6), sanctioning the construction of the Wet Dock, as a means of increasing the value of the young couple's property; the scheme, and the marriage, were also deeply embroiled in the politics surrounding the East India Company at the time. The extent of the influence deployed can be judged from the fact that around the same time, the old Earl was created Duke of Bedford, Wriothesley got the courtesy title Marquis of Tavistock. As the male Howland line had died out with John II, the subsidiary title Baron Howland of Streatham was also conferred on the Russells, and to this day, the heir presumptive to the Dukedom bears the courtesy title, Lord Howland. It was not intended that the dock would handle cargo, its purpose was to provide a safe place for vessels to lie up and refit between voyages - particularly those involved in the Eastern Trade. The low ranges of buildings on the quaysides were storehouses for rigging and spars removed from laid up ships. It appears that it was called the Great Wet Dock, to differentiate it from the existing drydock, mentioned above, on the Howland property. This later became the nucleus of the shipyard situated to the north of the Wet Dock entrance lock. The Act included provision for another drydock to be built, south of the lock. Both dockyards had a full range of facilities, and while under single management for lengthy periods, were sometimes leased out to different shipbuilding and repair firms. The date of completion is not known, but was either 1699 or 1700. A feature of the development was a mansion, set in formal gardens overlooking the dock. It has been said that this was intended as home for the young couple; there is no evidence that they ever stayed here. They did not begin living together until 1700,

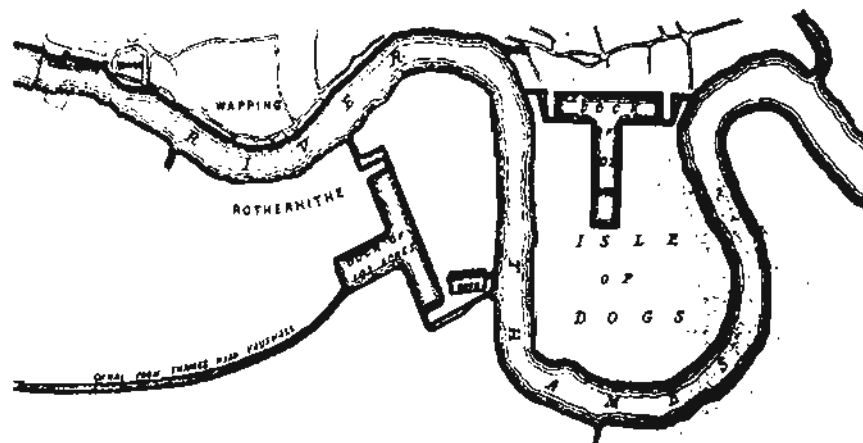


after Wriothesley had come down from university and been on the Grand Tour (where he accumulated large gambling debts, not settled until after his death); when in London, they usually stayed at Streatham, with Elizabeth's mother. The earliest surviving rates records for Rotherhithe indicate that the house was occupied either by the Steward of the Bedford London Estates, Mr. Butcher, or a by a close relation of his. It was demolished in 1802/3. By this time it had been the home of at least two successive members of the Wells shipbuilding family for about 40 years. Wriothesley, the second Duke of Bedford died (at Streatham, of smallpox) comparatively young, leaving the estate in the hands of trustees from 1711 to 1729, and one suspects that this led to a loss of direction in carrying out schemes for improvement and development. Early plans to develop land upstream of the dock with good quality housing, as the estate was doing.

An unlikely pair of Dock Owners; the young Duke and Duchess of Bedford. (From:- *A Silver Spoon in My Mouth*, by John, Duke of Bedford)

1796

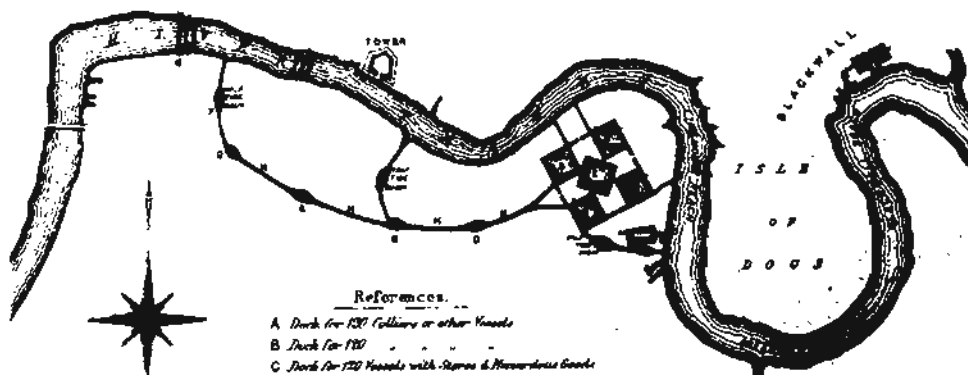
## CORPORATION SCHEME.



Scale of Feet.



## SOUTHWARK SCHEME.



## References.

- A. Dock for 120 Gallies or other Vessels
- B. Dock for 120
- C. Dock for 120 Vessels with Stores & Miscellaneous Goods
- D. Dock for 120 Empty Vessels for Charter or Sale
- E. Dock for 200 Small Crafts
- F. Half Tide Basins
- G. Mooring for Crafts
- H. Canal 1/2 Miles in Length

over in Bloomsbury, fell by the wayside, and would certainly have been incompatible with the estate's decision in 1724 to lease the dock to the South Sea Company, at £550 per annum as a whaling base, and site for refining blubber! Although this venture did not last long (it failed, having lost £1177, 782-3-0d, in 1732) other whaling interests moved in, and by the 1760's, the dock was recognised as the base of the Greenland whaling trade, and had become known as the "Greenland Dock". A similar lengthy period of trustee management occurred between the death of John, 4th Duke (from gout) in 1771, and Francis, 5th Duke, attaining his majority in 1786. The land set aside for housing eventually filled up with small shops, tradesman's premises and dwellings, many of which, when demolished to make way for the Redriff Estate in the 1930's, proved to be framed with reused old ship's timbers. Rotherhithe's last ship's figurehead carver, who just survived into the present century, had his workshop here, and there were small blocks of "tied cottages" like Sedger's Buildings and Castle's Buildings, whose original purpose had been to house key shipyard workers. The map inside the front cover clearly shows the lines of trees planted on both sides of the dock; these were not a decorative feature, but intended to shield moored vessels from the wind. Although they can only have been planted a few years before, they were mature enough by 27 November 1703 (the night of the great storm which destroyed Winstanley's Eddystone lighthouse and wrecked many Royal Navy ships in the Thames and the Channel) to help ensure that out of several ships in the dock, only one slightly injured her bowsprit. (Even then the persons responsible for mooring this ship were accused of having done so negligently!)

There is some doubt as to who actually built the Howland Great Wet Dock. John Wells, of the shipbuilding family is the favoured candidate. However, resident in Rotherhithe at the time was one Thomas Steers, a young man who gained some military engineering experience in Flanders during the 1690's. On leaving the army, he set up in business as a carpenter, on land leased from the widow Howland. In 1710, he was employed to build the first enclosed dock in Liverpool, which suggests that he had some experience of dock engineering behind him, and that this had been gained during his Rotherhithe stay. Also, the old Earl of Bedford may well have had a hand in the engineering side of things. Having changed sides twice during the Civil War, he wisely retired to one of his country estates, Thorney Abbey in Cambridgeshire. Here, until the Restoration, he devoted himself to massive land drainage and reclamation schemes, commemorated in the names Bedford River and Bedford levels. As originally built, the Howland Dock had timber walls, supported and braced by land-ties attached to wooden piles. The old Earl would have been very familiar with these construction methods from his work in the Fens.

## ORIGINS OF COMMERCIAL DOCK COMPANY

Customs regulations insisted that all dutiable goods had to be off loaded from ships or lighters at the Legal Quays, on the north bank of the river, between London Bridge and the Tower; exceptionally, bulky cargoes subjected to low duties, could be discharged onto a specially licensed "Sufferance" wharf. At some point, Greenland Dock must have acquired this status, because there is some evidence that timber imports began passing through here in the late 18th century. Whale oil was not dutiable - on the contrary, at various times it was in receipt of a subsidy. No doubt the comparative safety and security of ships and cargoes in the dock attracted notice, compared to the situation on the Thames.

By the 1790's, conditions on the river were chaotic due to delays from congestion and thefts from cargoes; in 1796, a Parliamentary Select Committee was set up to enquire into the best mode of providing accommodation for the increased trade and shipping of

the Port of London. This body sat for 25 days, and eventually reported that it accepted the principle that enclosed docks should be built, but did nothing further. It was left to private enterprise to come up with competing solutions. The illustration on page 4, shows two of these, both of which would have virtually obliterated Rotherhithe, but as none of the promoters lived there that did not seem to matter! In the event, development of what later became the Surrey Commercial Docks was to be piecemeal, and to take nearly 100 years. The Wells shipbuilding family had purchased Greenland Dock from the Bedford estate for £18,000 in 1763, although the shipyards flanking the entrances had been let to another shipbuilding firm by the estate on a long lease the previous year. In the early 1800's, the Wells brothers entered into a partnership with Perry and Green, shipbuilders of Blackwall, and began liquidating their property interests in Rotherhithe. In 1806, Greenland Dock was purchased by William Ritchie, either on behalf of, or with the intention of selling to, a company being formed under the nominal chairmanship of Alderman Sir Charles Price. Thus emerged as the Commercial Dock Company in 1807, bought Greenland Dock from Ritchie and the following year closed it for rebuilding, as a dock dealing mainly with the import of timber. As this undertaking did not get an Act of Incorporation until 1811, its first few years in business must have been as some kind of partnership amongst the promoters. Other changes had taken place by the time that Laurie & Whittle's Map was surveyed in 1809 and published in 1810/1 (See page 8). In 1808 the CDC appointed the 27 year old James Walker as their engineer, and the rebuilding of Greenland Dock was his first major job for them. Born in Falkirk, James had begun working for his uncle Ralph, who had no training as an engineer, on the construction of the West India Docks. When Ralph left under something of a cloud in 1802, he obtained a position as Resident Engineer under John Rennie building the East India Docks, and took James with him. Ralph subsequently became engineer to the Grand Surrey Canal (see below) at a time when that undertaking was in severe difficulties, but by then, James had established himself in practice with Alfred Burges. Although not a household name like Isambard Brunel (who hardly ever brought a project to completion on time and on budget), or Robert Stephenson (who wasted money by over-engineering, making everything at least twice as robust as it needed to be), James Walker was highly respected within his profession. He succeeded his uncle as Consulting Engineer to Trinity House, when Ralph died in 1824, and, on the death of Thomas Telford, became president of the Institution of Civil Engineers 1834-5. He also, despite having built lighthouses, railways, canals and bridges throughout Britain, working well into old age, outlived his younger rivals, dying aged 81 in 1862.

The Directors of the CDC liked to run a "tight ship", as the instructions which they issued in December 1807 to their Dockmaster show

*"That it is expected of the Dockmaster to attend and direct the Loading and Unloading of All Cargoes, Goods, etc. That he will be very particular in taking an exact account of the Cargo of each Vessel and its distribution on shore as soon as any one Cargo or distinct parcel of Goods is Landed and completely arranged. That he will take an Exact account of the Numbers, Quantities, Qualities, and other minute particulars, and how it is distributed or Warehoused, and also notice what extra expenses may have been incurred which have to be charges besides the usual Rent. He will also attend the delivery of all Goods, Timber, or Shipping, he will always obtain a written order from the Clerk previous to any delivery and will give to every Ship or parcel of Goods a Note of delivery descriptive of the Article going out of the Docks, which will be examined on passing by the Lock Master; he shall employ such men as shall be wanted for the delivery and Unloading and other works that may occur in the Docks, keeping an exact account of their time, carefully reserving work for the Dock Labourers; this account of Labour he will deliver to the Counting House on Saturday, when he will be supplied with money by the Clerk".*

*"He will at the tolling of the Bell at 8 o' clock in the evening carefully examine the North and West sides of the Docks, ascertain that all fires and Lights are extinguished and the Watchmen and sentries are on Duty, and report to the Commanding Officer if anything be amiss. For the better management of the men he will have the bell rung every morning from the 1st of February to the 1st of November at 6 o' clock and from 1st November to the 1st February at 7 o' clock when the men are mustered and the Names called over, he will direct them to their different employments; at half-past 8 o' clock the bell must be rung for breakfast and at nine to return to work, at 12 to go to dinner and at One to return and at 6 in the Evg. from Feb to Nov. and at 5 from Nov. to Feb. to leave off work.*

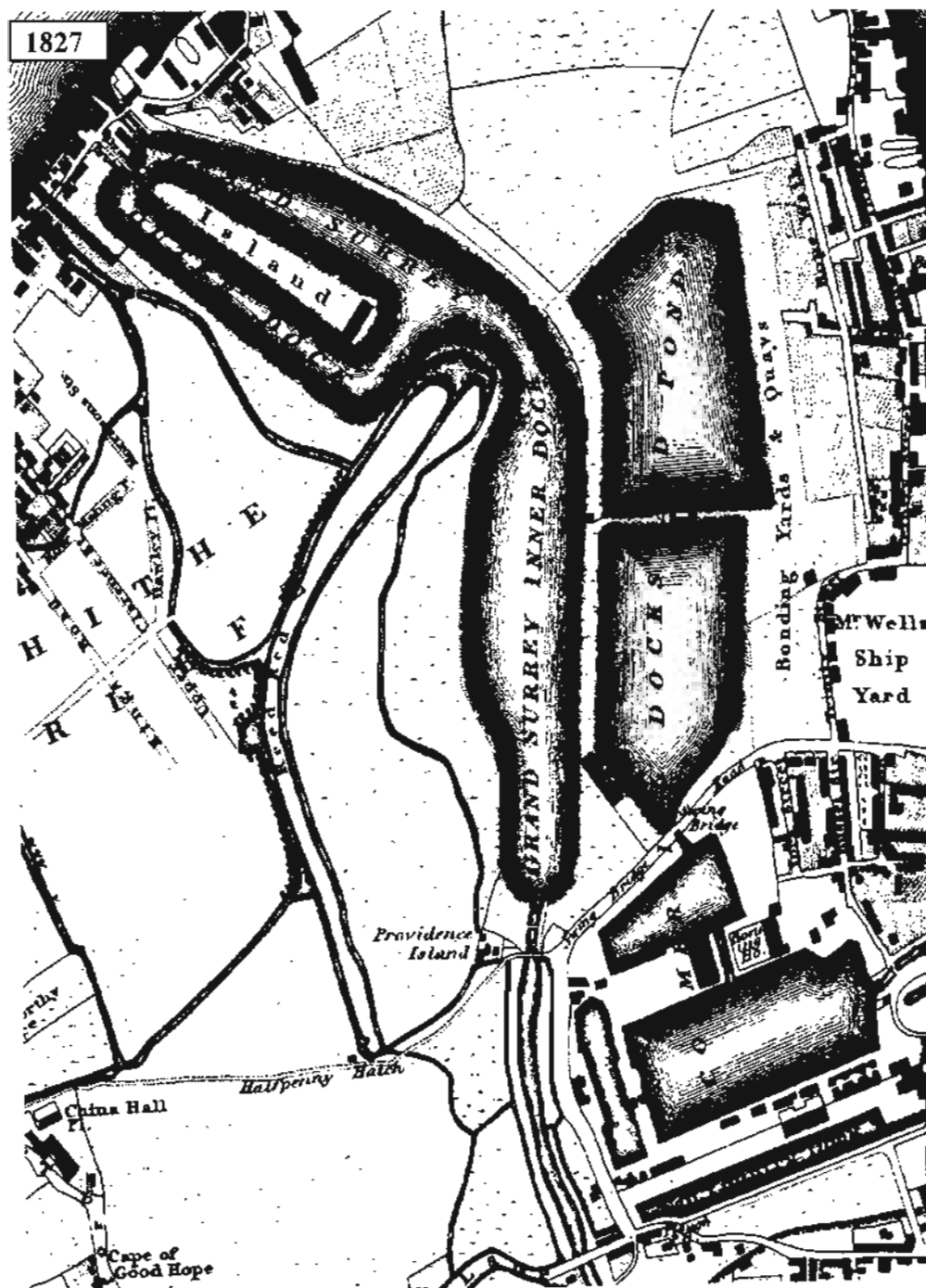
*The porter at the gate will ring the bell as directed above and at each gate the porters must be cautioned to be very attentive that nothing improper is taken out by the men. He will pay the Men the amount of their wages on Saturday Evgs., at the Counting House when all the Officers will attend. The Managers think it necessary to state distinctly that in case of illness or other unavoidable accident the Dock and Lock Masters are as far in their power to take each other's Duty".*

## RIVAL DOCKS APPEAR

The Grand Surrey Canal Company, an organisation beset by many problems in its early years, was incorporated in 1801, and had the misfortune to employ Ralph Dodd, a plausible visionary, with a tenuous grasp on reality, as engineer. Work began in 1802, with the intention of linking the Thames to a whole string of towns as far off as Epsom with the eventual intention, according to the prospectus, of reaching Portsmouth, via Southampton. Fortunately for the shareholders, the success of the early docks on the North bank caused the later incorporation of a basin or dock, near the entrance to the Thames, into the scheme. After this was opened in 1807, and for some time afterwards, it was the only part of the enterprise to make any money. The canal proper was to peter out at Camberwell and Peckham, all money and ambition spent, when the directors realised that there was more money to be made out of docks, even if one of them was very thin, and three miles long! Another saving grace had been their eventual appointment of Ralph Walker (see above), as engineer. Had it not been for his severely practical approach, the whole project might well have foundered. In due course this company would carve out its own share of the Rotherhithe peninsula. The map on page 8 shows at the bottom, just inland from the Dog & Duck Stairs, the outline excavation of what was shortly to become the East Country Dock. This company, formed in 1807, also had an eye on the Baltic timber trade, hence the name which referred to that end of the Baltic Sea, rather than East Anglia. An attempt was made by Sir Charles Price and his colleagues to buy this concern, but it did not surrender to the Commercial Dock Company until 1850. Even then, it might not have done so, if the opening of the London Brighton & South Coast Railway Deptford Wharf facility had not effectively cut off any chance of major future expansion.

Yet another competitor appeared on the scene in 1809 when a consortium of Rotherhithe landowners, headed by Joseph Moore, floated the Baltic Dock Company, due to astute political manoeuvring, they secured a promise from the Treasury for a preference in bonding wood, which Sir Charles Price and his friends had been expecting to secure for themselves. The Baltic Dock Company estate comprised most of the available land east of the Grand Surrey Canal, and north of the Commercial Docks. Thus placed in a double bind, the Commercial Company was forced to acquire Moore's enterprise, at a much inflated price; the Government, of course, reneged on the promise of preferential

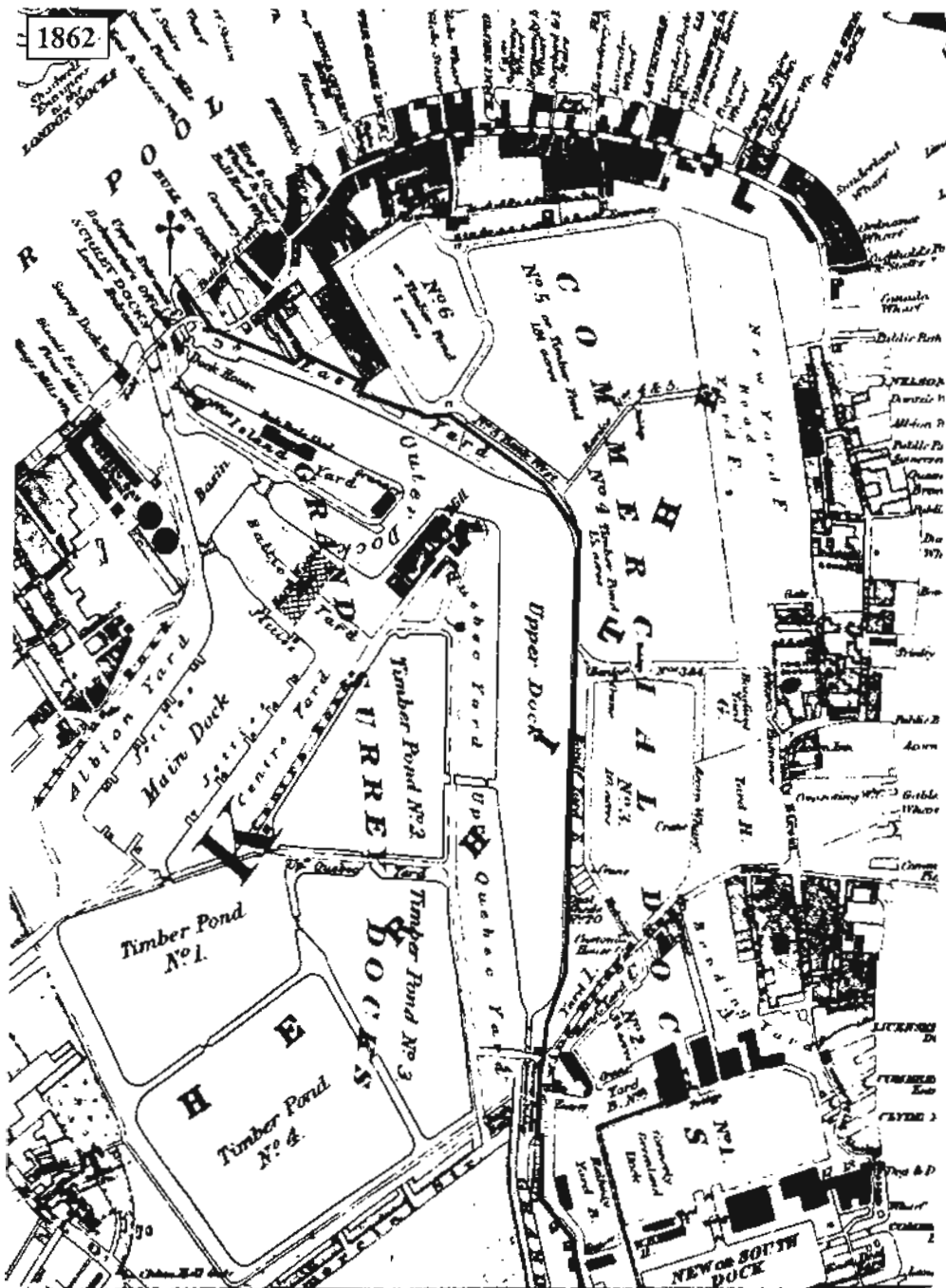
The new lock was 220ft long by 48 ft wide. For the first time there was also a direct connection to Greenland Dock, via what later became known as the Steelyard Cut. This also was 48ft wide, but only 25ft deep. South Dock was served by a railway connection to the LB&SCR at Deptford Wharf; this penetrated to the big grain warehouse at Greenland Dock in one direction and to the East Deal Yard which had been opened to the south of the new lock. Rails could still be seen in situ, where they passed into the dock estate after crossing Plough Way, as late as 1993. The new lock incorporated a cleverly designed sluice gate, patented by F. & A. Lawrence. Operating in a large underground chamber, it made use of the higher water pressure on the top side of the sluice to assist in raising or lowering the paddle. This labour saving device significantly reduced the time and manual effort involved in filling or emptying the lock. There was also a wrought iron footbridge, designed by the Company's engineer, James Walker, which carried a public right of way known as Commercial Dock Passage over the lock. This was relocated by the LDDC when modernising South Lock, and now spans the Norway Cut.



Until the 1850's, dock development in Rotherhithe had been largely on what we would now call "green field" sites, but the industry attracted by the docks, and the housing required for the workers had begun to fill in the remaining open areas. Future developments, (particularly on the Commercial Docks estate, pinched between Rotherhithe Street and the Grand Surrey Canal property), would require demolition. One of the first casualties was the King & Queen Iron Works - an old established foundry and steam rolling mill for wrought iron, which until the 1850's enjoyed an international reputation. The "English Bridge" which links Buda with Pest, has suspension chain links forged at the King & Queen; the spans of Robert Stephenson's Menai railway bridge were raised by King & Queen suspension chains, and the company exhibited at the Crystal Palace in 1851. However, by 1862, as page 12 shows, its site was occupied by Dock or Timber Pond No. 6, in the Commercial Docks System. This map is part of Stanford's Library Map of London, published in that year. It can be seen that there was now not much empty land on the peninsula; I have added a thick line (the ends are marked by † symbols) tracing the boundary between the Commercial Docks estate, and that of the Grand Surrey Docks & Canal Company (a name change adopted in 1855, the same year in which the CDC completed rebuilding South Dock).

The Directors of the Grand Surrey Docks and Canal Co. realised that if they were to compete effectively with the CDC, then they would have to extend and modernise their facilities. Land was purchased from Sir William Maynard Gomm, Lord of the Manor of Rotherhithe. The use of iron in shipbuilding resulted in a substantial increase in the size of vessels during the 1840's and 1850's, so the first requirement was for a larger lock giving access from the Thames. This was built about 50 yards up stream from the original lock, which was retained, presumably mainly for barge and lighter traffic. I have not yet traced the date when the old lock went out of use, but it had certainly been filled in by 1888. It seems to have been used mainly for craft heading for the Grand Surrey Canal, while the new lock was for dock access. In later years known as Surrey Lock, the new structure measured 250 ft by 50 ft, with a depth of 27 ft over the sill. It gave access to the Surrey Basin, roughly triangular in shape, replacing the timber pond mentioned above. Surrey Basin, filled in by the PLA (see page 33) still survives, thanks to the LDDC which cleared it out and restored it, was also 27 ft deep when built. With an area of just under three acres, it could be closed off from the rest of the system by further lock gates, so that vessels could be locked in and out of the river, without affecting the water level in the principal docks. The two exits from the basin were 50 ft wide, but only 25 ft deep. One opened into the remaining portion of the modernised Outer Dock, the other into the brand new Main Dock (later Albion Dock). This had a water area of just over of just over 11.5 acres and was 25 ft deep. The old Inner Dock was enlarged to about 14 acres in size, with a depth of 19 ft, and renamed Upper Dock. It was eventually to become Russia Dock, and remained as the route through the dock system to the Grand Surrey Canal. All these improvements were brought into use in July 1860. One of the engineers concerned was George Parker Bidder, who when an infant mathematical prodigy, had been exhibited as "The Calculating Boy". Contemporary with these works, and in use by 1862, were four large timber ponds, reached via a cut in the South east corner of the Main Dock, and with a further connection through into the Upper Dock.

The CDC did not enjoy a similar convenience in respect of the further reaches of their timber ponds. For a lighter, or float of timber to reach Timber Pond No. 6, it would have to thread its way through Greenland Dock, Norway Dock, Lady Dock and two other timber ponds. This must have been a cause of endless delay and frustration, particularly



at the obvious bottle necks. The CDC decided to alleviate the problem by building a new lock giving direct access to the timber ponds from the Thames into Lavender Pond (No. 5 on the Bacon's map). An Act of Parliament was duly obtained in May 1860, and the new lock opened for traffic in September 1862. It was 320ft long, 34ft wide and had a depth over the sill of 18.5ft. It will be seen that this was much larger (particularly in depth) than would be required for lighters and floats of timber, so the company obviously had an eye to future development. Although they were later to be modernised and deepened, with proper quay sides and timber storage sheds, the timber ponds exercised a peculiar fascination for people who remembered them, largely because nature seemed to be trying to restore the marshy habitat which had been there before. Fox-Smith, in *Thames Side Yesterdays*, wrote this: "Unexpected birds used to nest among those mysterious rafts of timber that used to lie, year in, year out, or so it seemed, completely untouched and apparently forgotten in certain of the less frequented ponds - Lavender and Acorn Ponds in particular. Presumably they did belong to someone... There are legends of monster carp here, though these, frankly I have never seen, though I would not go so far on that account as to deny their presence. Odd things find their way into docks sometimes. There was once a turtle, for example, which was brought home from Ascension Island by a couple of young Merchant Navy officers, who cherished golden dreams of selling it to Birch's or the Lord Mayor's cook at a handsome profit. Alas! There was a glut of turtles at the time; and, having carted it around the best part of a day on top of a cab, the disappointed investors carried it back to the docks, and dumped it over the side. What became of it, history deponeth not. It may, of course, have died quickly of too rich a diet of Thames mud; or it may have found its way out through the dock entrance, and paddled off on a three thousand mile voyage to its native haunts... But Lavender Pond and Acorn Pond... are no longer the quiet haunts they were when I first knew them - secluded stretches of water that seemed to mirror the beauty of some slender and lofty ship, some lost lady of old time, stealing in from the seas to dream there alone of the days of old; where you could wander among the piled up deals almost as alone as if you were in the original pine forests."

By the time that the various improvements of the early 1860's had been completed, both the Commercial Docks Company, and the Grand Surrey Docks and Canal Company, were facing stiff competition from docks on the North bank. The Grand Surrey, was particularly dependent upon the Baltic timber trade, but the Commercial had developed satisfactory levels of traffic in grain and other foodstuffs; also, in those pre-refrigerator days, in imported ice. The directors of the Surrey company apparently took leave of their senses, and initiated a ruinous period of rate cutting competition for timber traffic - never a wise course when occupying the weakest position - in which the Commercial company gleefully joined. After nearly beggaring themselves, common sense at last prevailed. In 1865, the rival Rotherhithe dock undertakings amalgamated to form the Surrey Commercial Docks Company. Apart from the obvious legacy of their dock estates, the employment which they provided, and the substantial sums paid to the parish in rates, each had contributed in other ways to the local community. In the 1840's Rotherhithe had a zealous and energetic Rector, the Rev. Edmund Blick, who faced with a greatly increased population arising from the influx of dock workers, and employees of associated industries, set about building new churches and schools. The Commercial Docks Company gave the necessary land for Trinity Church and its associated school rooms. The generosity of this bequest was slightly tarnished by one of the directors later describing the land given as "expensive" - in fact it was part of the properties acquired by the Baltic Dock Company for the never-built new entrance (see above). The Grand Surrey was always more impecunious, but they helped fund the Surrey Canal School, primarily, but not exclusively for the benefit of the children of its employees.

This was located in Ram Alley, now Beatson Walk, and its site is covered by the present Peter Hills School. Trinity Church was a Blitz casualty, but the schoolrooms still stand, in use as a community centre. Although only dating from 1836, with the exception of the cluster of buildings in the Conservation Area near St Mary's Church, and the old police station in Paradise Street, the Trinity Hall is probably the oldest surviving building in Rotherhithe. The Luftwaffe and successive generations of planners, who do not have to live in the environments which they create, have seen to that!

#### TRIBULATIONS OF A DOCKMASTER.

In 1865, John McArthur, Dockmaster at the recently opened Surrey Entrance Lock, kept a daily journal, which recorded weather conditions, the height and time of high tide, and details of the vessels in and out. Whether this had been standard practice under the GSDCC, or was an innovation under the Surrey Commercial Docks Co. is not known. The Log had been written up contemporaneously in two standard exercise books with mottled covers, and, according to J. G. Linney, who had the opportunity of studying them in the 1930's, they were fine examples of penmanship "...obviously the work of a man who was painstaking and methodical in recording accurately what he considered to be the necessary daily details of his routine." A typical entry read "Wednesday, February 8th, a.m. Tide. Fresh breeze from North and cloudy. Undocked twenty six barges, and four hundred and twenty-one pcs. timber. Docked ten barges. High water 0 hrs. 46 min P.M. - 26 ft. 11 in. Had 1 hr. 10 min. level. Bar. 29.89. A. 40." (Note:- The last two sets of figures are meteorological readings. The pieces of timber referred to would have been fastened together with ropes and iron staples into manageable rafts for towing, or propelling with sweeps in the river).

"Of course it is to be expected that sailing craft rather than steam vessels figure in the Journal. There are records of barques, schooners, brigs, galliots, in addition to the barges; now and then a sloop and a brigantine. The screw collier *Primus* appears regularly in McArthur's pages," wrote Linney). Something odd happened to the tide on the afternoon of 20 February. "This tide rose very slowly till 7 hrs. 50 min when it stopped at 22 ft. and fell 2 inches. It remained at that till 15 mins. past 8, when it commenced to rise fast, and continued rising till 50 mins. past 8, having attained the height of 23 ft. 6 in. when it began to fall rapidly. The bad weather outside is the cause of this." Sailing colliers were a particular trial to McArthur, as we can see from the behaviour of the brig *Sarah Richardson* on 2 March. "...the bridge was open 27 minutes, not being able to get her clear, until they got a rope to the buoy - as these colliers never take steam to pull them out". Reference was made earlier to the Chicory Mill in the sharp bend known as Rice Mill Corner. On 15 March, "...a fire having broken out in the Chicory Mill, all hands were called out a little before five o'clock this morning and succeeded in confining it within the building. All danger over by six o'clock." - Which must have been a considerable relief to a man in charge of a dock full of wooden ships, and surrounded by stacks of timber. A couple of months later, McArthur had to report damaging a ship in getting the *Nile* into the dock, but he carefully recorded all the mitigating circumstances. "She was deep (i.e. heavily laden), the tide was poor, and a six-inch warp parted at an awkward moment... The tide pinched as she was going into the lock." In July he was "...obliged to have to report Lockgatesman I. Crutchley for "...giving insulting answers to Foreman H. Hewitt, while finding fault with him for not attending to his duty properly. This is not the first like offence. I have warned him of it before, which seemingly has had no effect, and I have been obliged to act." The following month there was a collision when the brig *Mary Eleanor* coming into the Dock hit the ship *Carl*. The cause was interference in the handling of ropes by the lockmen, on the part of the *Carl*'s captain. "I have frequently had to check some of these masters myself in making themselves too officious, giving

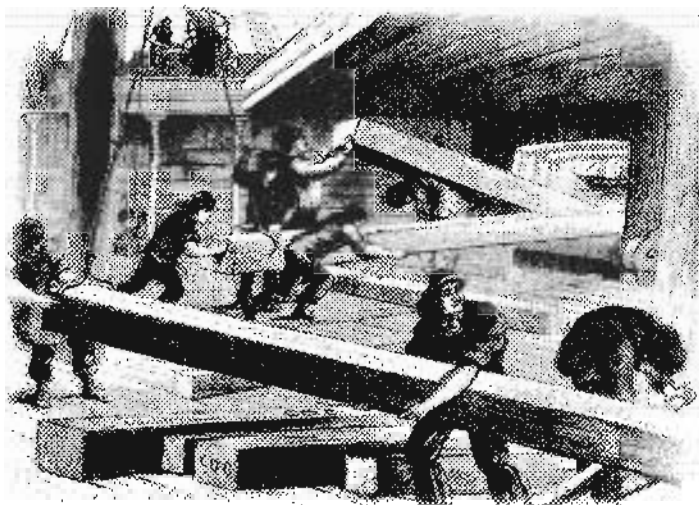
giving orders when they had no occasion, thereby causing confusion." Wrote McArthur. There was trouble over a raft of timber which went missing from the vicinity of the Rice Mill on 24th August, but it was returned with an explanation which satisfied McArthur that no dishonesty was involved. However, his account does indicate that at times he felt very much under pressure. "I am sorry this has happened, and only wonder at having run so long clear considering what has to be done at this lock sometimes during the tide - receiving canal dues, ship's water money and giving receipts for the same - that when we are busy it is almost too much for one man to manage properly". On 7 November there was another collision, this time just outside the entrance to the lock. "...A barque came up this tide with two whole top sails set, and trying - very foolishly to reeve her in between the tier of ships lying off the entrance and the tier at the swinging buoy above them; the bowsprit of one of the latter caught her mainmast and broke it off by the board, the wreck taking the mizzen topmast with it". Finally in this chapter of incidents, McArthur had trouble with some lightermen just before Christmas. "This morning three lightermen opened our basin gates at the entrance to the main dock before our people came and passed timber into the basin. One of them was pointed out to me - William Bailey, Junr. - by a policeman who saw them, but he could not swear to the other two. This must be put a stop to - besides they have the chain on the winch the wrong way and injured the brick work in the chain hole"

#### LUMPERS AND DEAL PORTERS.

McArthur's journal gives some insight into the problems and day - to - day activities of one of the dock management, but what was working life like for the dock labourers at this time? Most dock labour was casual, with just sufficient hands being hired on a daily basis to carry out the available work. Particularly in the timber trade, the hiring was done by "contractors" who had agreements with the dock companies to provide workers as necessary. With the unpredictability of sailing ship arrivals, this suited the dock companies very well; for the payment of one fee, all the work of assembling sufficient hands, supervising them, and paying them was done, thus saving the companies a great deal of time and trouble. These contractors were often in another line of business too. Some were shopkeepers - perhaps butchers or bakers, but the majority were publicans, operating from dockside pubs and inns; those "Lumpers" who spent much of their earnings on drink, could naturally expect to be given preference when a day's work was allocated. Henry Mayhew gave a graphic account of his interview with a timber Lumper published in 1851, but conditions had changed little by McArthur's time. "The Lumpers are, if possible, in a more degraded state than the ballast-heavers; they are not, it is true, under the same amount of oppression from the publican, but still they are so besotted with the drink which they are tempted to obtain from the publicans who employ them, as to look upon the man who tricks them out of their earnings rather as a friend than as an enemy... The timber-trade is divided by the custom of the trade into two classes, called timber and deals... Timber and deals require about the same time for their discharge".

"The following evidence of a Lumper was given unwillingly; indeed it was only by a series of cross-questioning that any approximation to the truth could be extracted from him. He was evidently in fear of losing his work; and the tavern to which I had gone to take his statement was filled with foremen watching and intimidating him. He said:- "I am a working Lumper, or labourer at discharging timber or deal-ships. I have been sixteen years at the work. I should think that there are more than two-hundred men... who are constantly engaged at the work; there are a great many more working Lumpers living at Limehouse, Poplar, and Blackwall. These do the work principally of the West India Docks; and when the work is slack there and brisk at the Commercial,

an East Country, or Grand Surrey Canal Docks, the men cross the water and get a job on the Surrey side of the river. In summer a great many Irish labourers seek for work as Lumpers. They came over from Ireland in the Cork boats. I should say there are altogether upwards of 500 regular working Lumpers; but in the summer there are at least 200 more, owing to the number of Irish who come to England to look for work at that time of year. The wages of the regular Lumpers are not less when the Irish come over in the summer, nor do the men get a less quantity of work to do. There are more timber and deal ships arriving at that season, so more hands are required to discharge them. The ships begin to arrive in July and they continue coming in till January. After that time, they lay up till March, when they sail for the foreign ports. Between January and July the regular working Lumpers have little or nothing to do. During that time there are scarcely any timber or deal ships coming in; and the working Lumpers then try to fall in with anything they can, either ballasting a ship, or carrying a few deals to load a timber carriage... Our usual time of working is from six to six in the summer time and from daylight to dark in the winter. We always work under a foreman. There are two Foreman Lumpers to almost every ship that we discharge; and they engage the men, who work in gangs under them. I work under a publican. My master has only gone into the public line very lately. I don't think he's been at it more than eighteen months. He has been a Master Lumper I should say for these 10 or twelve years past. I worked under him before he had a public-house. Then he paid every Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday nights, at the same house he is now proprietor of, and most of these meet at his house on Tuesday and Thursday nights, and all of them on Saturday night, either to be settled with in full or have part of their wages advanced. We are usually paid at 7 o'clock in the evening. I have been paid as late as 3 o'clock on Sunday morning; but that was some years ago, and I was all that time in the public-house. We go straight to the public-house after we have done our work."

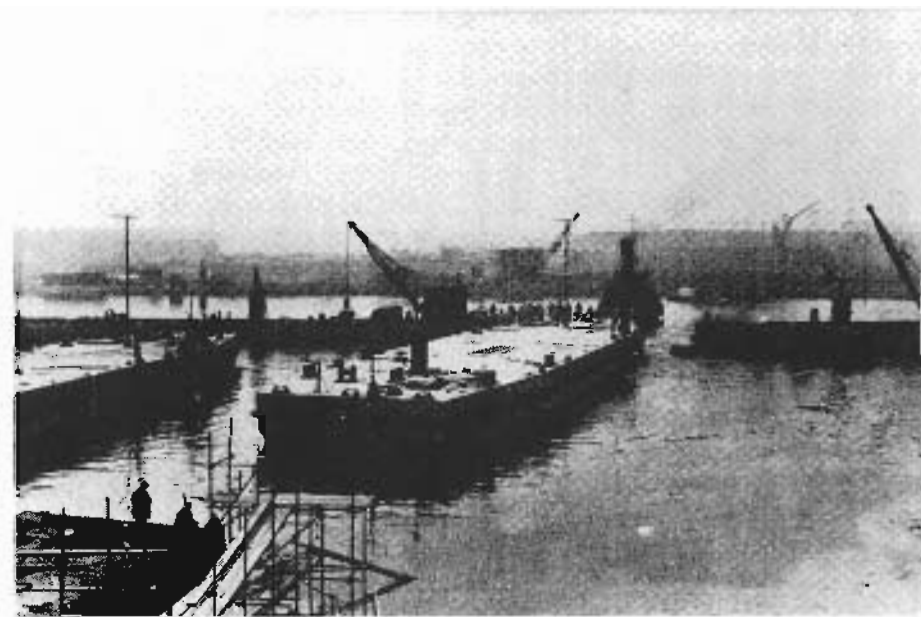


Lumpers at work in the hold of a ship. Note the Commercial Dock Co. brand on some of the baulks, and the stern port, which would have been sealed up and caulked for the voyage to England.

From :- *London Labour & The London Poor*, by Henry Mayhew.

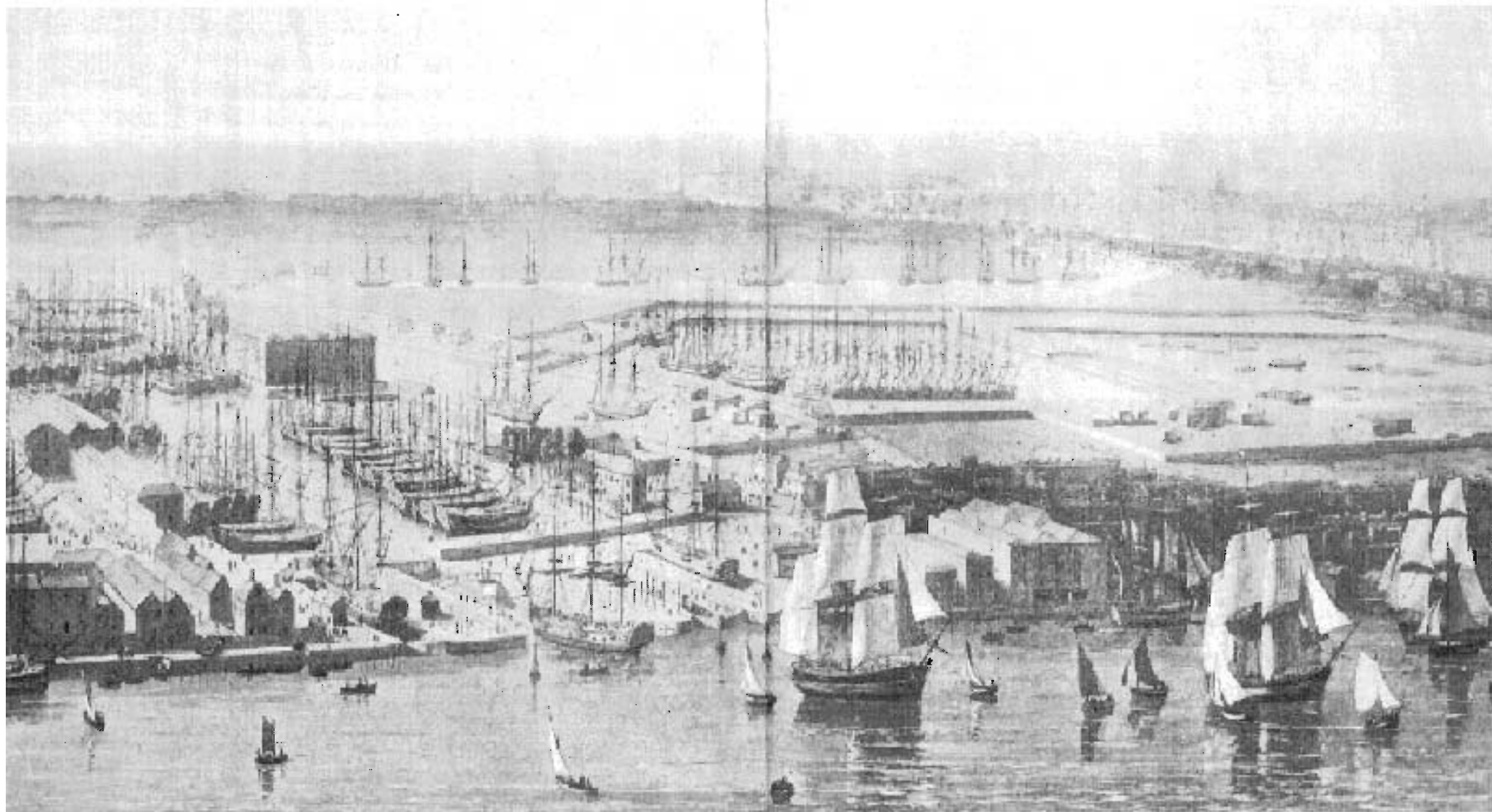


The Canadian Cold Store ablaze at Greenland Dock, 1940. Photo :-LDDC



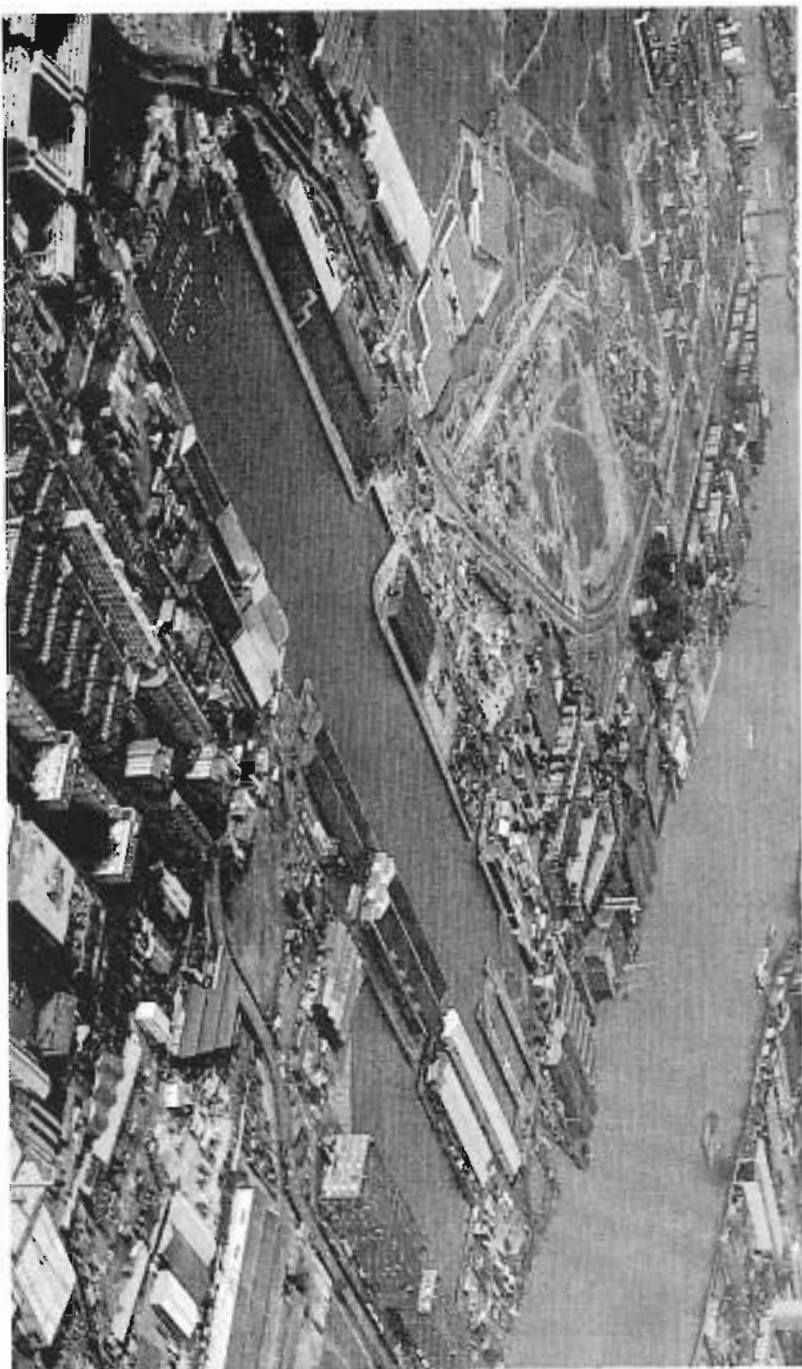
Concrete Admiralty Minesweeping Barge, being edged out of temporary berth into Russia Dock. Winter 1944/5. Rotherhithe gasworks can just be glimpsed across the devastated quays.

Photo :- Mowlem



*The Commercial Docks at Rotherhithe, 1813, by William Daniell. From a contemporary print.*  
The ships in the middle distance are on the Grand Surrey Canal. Note the Timber Ponds to the right, with rafts afloat on the water and stacks around the edge.

An aerial view of Greenland and South Docks, after closure. Note that Norway, Russia, Lady and Lavender Docks have been filled in. Photo:- LDDC



Lumpers earned between 2s-6d (12 112p) and 4s-0d (20p) per day. They worked mainly in the holds of ships, unloading timber over the side. Deal Porters, who moved and stacked the cargo on land, were more highly skilled, and generally speaking, a better class of men. They were paid 4 1/2d (less than 2p an hour) - a rate that was fixed in the 1820's and despite inflation, remained in force for over 50 years. Their job required not merely strength, but also skill and agility; by the age of 40, they were too old for the work. Until the 1820's, timber imports had been almost entirely in the form of rough baulks and logs. Obviously, this entailed paying for the transport of much wasted weight by the time that they had been sawn up to make planks and deals. The exporters began sending consignments of ready cut and sawn timber, but these were loaded into the ships purely on the basis of cramming as much in as possible - irrespective of size. It was the Deal Porters' task to sort the deals into similar sizes, carry them to their allotted storage space, and pile them neatly into stacks, which might be up to 20 or 30 feet high. As the stacks got higher, the Deal Porters reached the top by running up planks, carrying the deals over one shoulder, and using the natural spring in the plank to help them get up in a kind of "bounding trot."

It was very arduous work, and not without danger. It was also one of the last skilled dock labouring jobs to be completely superseded by machinery, and Deal Porters were still being trained in the Surrey Docks as late as 1965.

#### THE DOCKER'S TANNER

Skilled workers, like shipwrights, who in modern parlance possessed some "industrial muscle", began organising themselves into proto-trade unions late in the 18th century, usually under the cloak of Friendly Societies. These had, and used, the power to organise strikes wringing concessions from employers or the Government. Unskilled, or semiskilled workers however, did not see this as an option until much later. With a large pool of labour chasing too few jobs, there was no point in striking when there were ten men available to take your job. Also, poorly paid casual workers, as were most dock workers, did not have a regular income, with a small surplus, available to pay dues or subscriptions to a Friendly Society, or other form of association.

This began to change in 1871, after Colonel du Plat Taylor, recently appointed Secretary of the East & West India Dock Co., attempted to revive the declining dividends of his company by introducing new payment scales which amounted to a 25% cut for the lowest earners - from about £1 per week to 15/- . One of the affected dockers, a Mr. Caulfield, organised a meeting in Bethnal Green, at which it was reluctantly conceded that there was little they could do. *"The men are comparatively helpless in the matter"* said the Eastern Post. *"They are so poor that a strike or even a combination with a view to joint action is not to be thought of. They can only appeal to the companies to reconsider the whole question, and ask the public to sustain their appeal"*. At this point, Patrick Hennessey, a tailor by trade and a trade unionist by conviction took a hand; after two further meetings, The Labour Protection League was formed in December, with Caulfield as Secretary, and a principle objective of fighting wage reductions for dock workers. Unfortunately, Caulfield saw an opportunity of cushioning his own wage reduction, and absconded with the League's meagre and hard-won funds. This disaster almost ended the matter, but the pioneers persevered, and by May 1872, The Labour Protection League had branches in Wapping, Southwark, Horsleydown and Greenwich. A crucial step had been the recruitment of stevedores to the movement - better skilled and slightly better paid workers, who had some status to maintain, followed by corn porters working in the granaries and wharves of the South side and the docks. By October, the membership was 30,000, of which 18,000 were on the South bank. The Horsleydown Branch alone boasted 750 members, mainly employees of the General

Steam Navigation Co. The League pursued modest demands, and picked off small employers, one at a time, with a series of small strikes beginning in June, always winning an extra penny or so on daily rates which had been as little as 3d or 4d per hour. Conflicts arose between the leadership of The League (who continually counselled a moderate approach, with a view to securing permanent recognition, and the chance to put pressure on the big dock companies) and the membership, who having risked everything by taking action at all, wanted to wring the last farthing from employers before they would go back. In the event, they did take on the big companies during 1872, but probably too soon; the cuts imposed by the E. & W. I. Dock Co. were rescinded, after a strike which spread to most of the other docks, but the employers would not budge on two main demands - a minimum rate of 6d per hour, and the abolition of the disliked system of contractors, described in the section on Lumpers and Deal Porters. It would be another 17 years before these matters came to a head. The year 1872, saw the beginnings of trade union protection for the poorest of dock workers, but anything like fairness was going to involve a long hard road. An early result of 1872's events, was that the dock companies began employing more permanent staff, over whom they could exercise greater control, with correspondingly fewer chances of casual work for the others.

As for the League, by the early 1880's, it had shrunk to six branches, only one of which was on the South bank. This alone, was comprised of corn porters, the other branches by now being exclusively stevedores. Towards the end of the decade, it changed its name to the Amalgamated Stevedores Protection League, and the surviving corn porters branch on the Surrey side struggled on in isolation.

Whole books have been written about the Great Dock Strike of 1889, and the event is solidly embedded in trade union and riverside folklore. This must be a very brief summary. The villain of the piece was again the E. & W. I. Dock Co., which reduced hourly rates for casual workers at the new Tilbury Docks to pre 1872 levels. Encouraged by the success of the newly formed Gasworker's Union in rapidly winning an eight hour day for its members early in 1889, Ben Tillett, of the small Tea Operatives and General Labourers' Association, organised a strike amongst the affected workers which failed. Shortly after, a separate Dockers Union was proposed at South West India Dock, and Tillett was more or less forced to call a strike, beginning on 14 August 1889, or see his own organisation swept aside by the new. To begin with, the action was confined to employees of the E. & W. I. Co., but decades of ill-treatment by employers, and of being cheated by contractors had their effect; the stevedores threw their weight behind the dispute, and on 20 August, the workers at the Victoria & Albert and London & St. Katherine's struck. The lightermen came out the following day, and were soon followed by the corn porters, represented by the rump of the Labour Protection League. By 22 August, the whole port was at a standstill.

Managing the dispute was a mammoth task; with varied groups of employees, all with specialised grievances, several different employers, unions of differing strengths, financial status and experience, the result could have been chaos. Four basic demands emerged. Firstly, that the minimum hourly rate should be 6d (The Docker's Tanner). Next, that overtime rates (after possibly working a 12 hour day!) should be 8d per hour. Thirdly, that hiring men, perhaps just for an hour or two, must cease; if a man was taken on, he must be guaranteed half a day's work. Finally, the contractor's system must cease.

As the dispute rapidly took on the character of a General Strike in London, with workers at Peak Frean's, Maudslays, Ashby's Cement Works and the Telegraph Works in Greenwich all joining in a fight for their own minimum wage, and others coming out in support of more poorly paid colleagues, the South Side was given virtual autonomy to

# SOUTH SIDE CENTRAL STRIKE COMMITTEE, SAYES COURT, DEPTFORD.

SEPTEMBER 10, 1889.

## GENERAL MANIFESTO.

Owing to the fact that the demands of the Corn Porters, Deal Porters, Granary Men, General Steam Navigation Men, Permanent Men and General Labourers on the South Side have been misrepresented, the above Committee have decided to issue this Manifesto, stating the demands of the various sections now on Strike, and pledge themselves to support each section in obtaining their demands.

**DEAL PORTERS** of the Surrey Commercial Docks have already placed their demands before the Directors.

**LUMPERS (Outside)** demand the following Rates, viz.: 1. 10d. per standard for Deals. 2. 11d. per stand. for all Goods rating from 2 x 4 to 24 x 7, or for rough boards. 3. 1s. per std. for plain boards. Working day from 7 a.m. to 5 p.m., and that no man leave the "Red Lion" corner before 5.45 a.m. Overtime at the rate of 6d. per hour extra from 5 p.m. including meal times.

**STEVEDORES (Inside)** demand 6d. per hour from 7 a.m. to 5 p.m. 1s. per hour overtime. Overtime to commence from 5 p.m. to 7 a.m. Pay to commence from leaving "Red Lion" corner. Meal times to be paid for. Holidays & Meal times double pay, and that the rules of the Dock Statutes be strictly enforced. *Enacted*

**OVERSIDE CORN PORTERS (S.C.D.)** demand 15s.3d. per 100 qrs. for Oats. Heavy labour (7s.3d. per 100 qrs. malted, or with use of Steam 16s.1d. All overtime after 6 p.m. to be paid at the rate of 1d. per qr. extra.

**QUAY CORN PORTERS (S. C. D.)** demand the return of Standard prices previous to March 1889, which had been in operation for 17 years.

**TRIMMERS AND GENERAL LABOURERS** demand 6d. per hour from 7 a.m. to 6 p.m. and 8d. per hour Overtime; Meal times as usual; and not to be taken on for less than 6 hours.

**WEIGHERS & WAREHOUSEMEN** demand to be reinstated in their former positions without distinction.

**BERMONDSEY AND ROTHERHITHE WALL CORN PORTERS** demand.

1. Permanent Men 30s. per week. 2. Casual Men 5s. 10d. per day and 8d. per hour Overtime; Overtime to commence at 6 p.m. Meal times as usual.

**GENERAL STEAM NAVIGATION MEN** demand:- 1. Wharf Men, 6d. per hour from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. and 8d. per hour Overtime. 2. In the Stream, 7d. per hour ordinary time, 8d. per hour Overtime. 3. In the Dock, 6d. per hour ordinary time, 1s. per hour Overtime.

**MAUDSLEY'S ENGINEER'S MEN.** Those receiving 21s. per week now demand 24s., and those receiving 24s. per week demand 28s.

**ASHBY'S, LTD. CEMENT WORKS** demand 6d. per ton landing Coals and Chalk. General Labourers 10% rise of wages all round, this making up for a reduction made 3 years ago.

**GENERAL LABOURERS, TELEGRAPH CONSTRUCTION** demand 4s. per day from 6 a.m. to 5 p.m., time and a quarter for first 2 hours Overtime, and if later, time and a half for all Overtime. No work to be done in Meal hours.

Signed on behalf of the Central Committee, Wade Arms,

BEN. TILLET,  
JOHN BURNS,  
TOM MANN,  
H. H. CHAMPION,  
JAS. TOOMEY.

Signed on behalf of the South side Committee,

JAS. SULLY,  
CHAS. B.  
HUGH.

Wade to be sent to Mr. HUGH BBO

Central Strike Committee, Sayes Court

South Side Strike Committee Handbill, 1889 (Museum of Labour History)

handle things this side of the river, while keeping the Central Strike Committee informed. This they did from Headquarters at Sayes Court in Deptford. When publicity was given to the terrible poverty in which many working Londoners were living, public sympathy was largely on the side of the strikers. Relief funds were subscribed to, including very generous financial help from Australia.

It was to take the personal mediation of Cardinal Manning to settle the dispute, but the strike eventually came to an end, after agreements were signed on 12 September; the men had gained most of their aims, although it would be six weeks to two months before some of them would come into force. On the 25 September, the Sayes Court Committee resolved to form a central committee of delegates from all south side labour organisations, to be known as the central Council of the "South Side Labour Protection League". A wheel of change which began turning in 1872, had completed just one revolution.

### CONSOLIDATION

Having briefly followed the worker's story up to 1889, we must now go back and see what happened to the docks themselves. The 20 years after the merger were largely a period of consolidation for the new company. The names by which the various docks were known in Port of London Authority days were introduced, and the two separate systems were linked by a connection from Lavender Pond to Slave Dock. Dry land was becoming a scarce commodity at the North end of the peninsula, and some reduction in size of the former CDC timber ponds was made, to allow more room for stacking timber. A large new deep water dock (Canada Dock) was completed in 1876, not without some difficulty as it was very close to the East London Railway, and enormous mass concrete retaining walls were built to protect this. The new dock occupied roughly the site of the two lower timber ponds (1 and 4) shown on page 12, but as the exit from Albion Dock was at an awkward angle, this was truncated, and turned into a small drydock for lighter repairs, which still survives, albeit buried under the grey retail sheds of "Pentathlon", (see page 36). A new wider cut was made joining Albion and Canada Docks, and much of the massive masonry for this can still be traced around the point where Albion Channel flows out of Canada Water. During this period the railway connection into the Surrey Commercial Docks reached its fullest extent, extending almost to Norway Dock entrance. Various small industrial enterprises once flourished on odd patches of land within the dock estate, but these were gradually eliminated as the need for more timber stacking space grew. By 1888, only the old established rice mill at Slave Dock remained - and this was soon to go. Despite this quite hefty investment, the Surrey Commercial Docks Company paid regular dividends of 6% after the merger.

The grain traffic handled at the Surrey Docks was always of considerable importance in terms of revenue earning; this came not only from Canada, but also in the middle years of the last century from the Black Sea ports. Grain warehouses at the new Canada Dock could accommodate 35,000 tons. Developments, first on the Isle of Dogs, with the new Millwall Dock (opened 1868), the South West India Dock (opened 1870) and further downstream the Royal Albert Dock opened (opened 1880) offered better accommodation for the larger ships which were coming into use. The Surrey Commercial Docks Company, fearing principally for their earnings from grain, embarked on an ambitious plan to rebuild and extend the Greenland Dock. It was a decision which would play a major part in hastening the end of the privately owned dock companies on the Thames. Large scale acquisitions and demolition of both domestic and industrial property were involved - by now unavoidable in Rotherhithe, where virtually every available surface was either water or built upon. Two major road realignments were also required, and the rest of the Surrey Docks system had to be kept working throughout. An Act of Parliament was obtained in 1894, and work began under the engineer employed by the

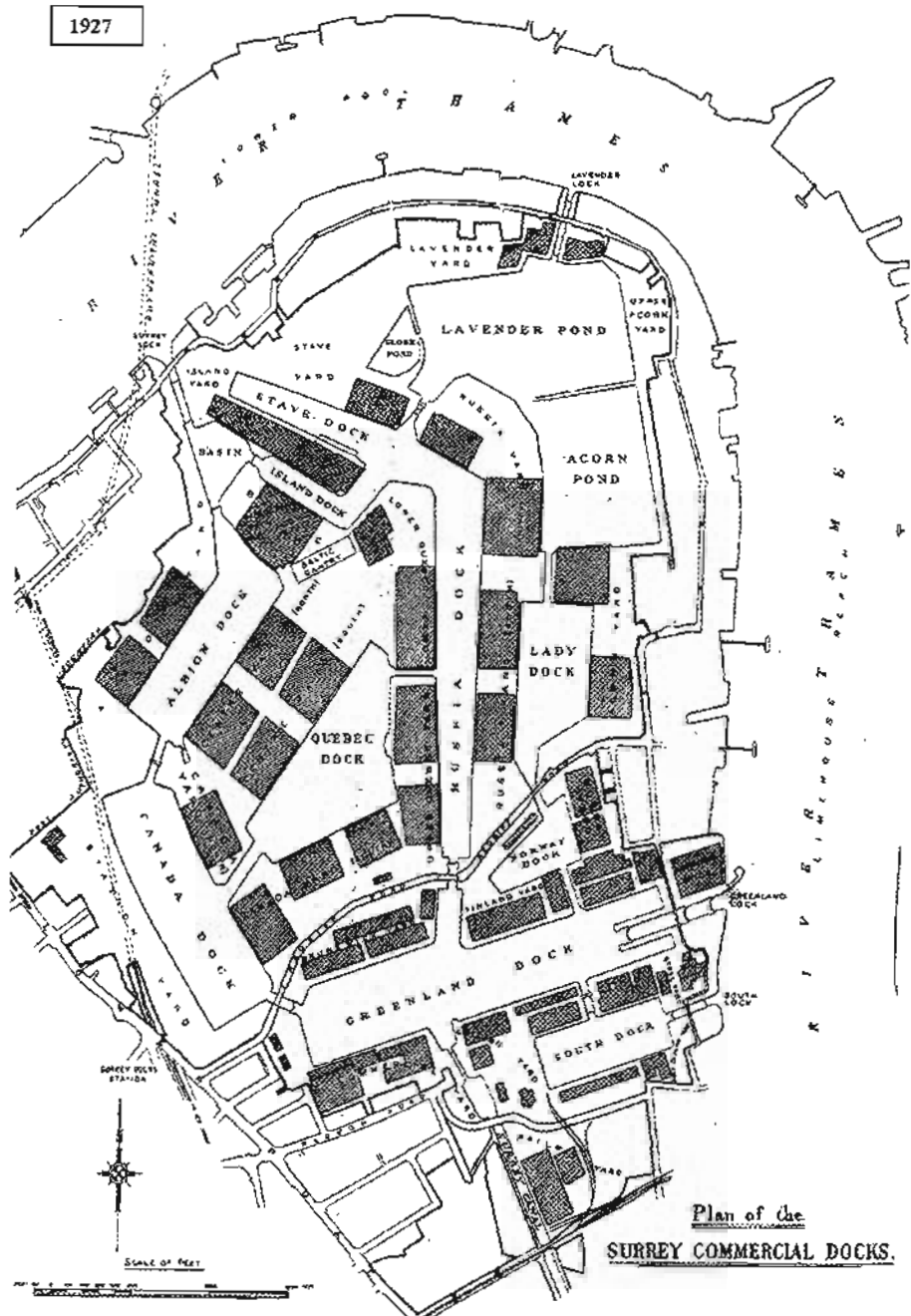
company, James A. MacConnochie, about whom I have been able to discover little; he was engineer on the Canada Dock project, mentioned earlier, and was responsible for redeveloping the lower section of Limehouse Dockyard for the Aberdeen Steam Navigation Co (1874-1878), also the rebuilding of Poplar Dry Dock for J. & R. B. Brown (1878-1880). He is also credited with the clock tower and the dock offices of 1890-92 which survive in Surrey Quays Road. One suspects that he was perhaps not quite up to the task at Greenland Dock, but he died at an early stage in the work, and the company chose John Wolfe-Barry (1836-1918) in his place.



Left:- The Surrey Commercial Dock Offices, as restored by the LDDC.  
Photo:- Author 1992

Fresh from the successful completion of Tower Bridge, Wolfe-Barry was knighted in 1897, and had extensive dock engineering experience behind him in Wales and on the Tyne, Tees and the Clyde. His first step was to suggest various modifications to MacConnochie's plans, including lengthening the entrance lock, and adding 100 ft to the width of the dock. It is as well that he did. Ten long years were to pass before the enlarged dock opened, and with the original measurements it would have already been obsolescent. It is probably to one of Barry's modifications that we owe the ingenious construction of Greenland Lock, whereby sufficient length was obtained by extending the lock chamber into the dock itself, while losses of water due to locking in and out could be reduced by using additional sets of gates to make the lock smaller for shorter vessels. To avoid disrupting traffic on the Grand Surrey Canal too much, the work was divided into two separate contracts, that to the West, including the connection to Canada Dock was intended to be completed first. The river end, and the new lock were to be tackled next. Wolfe-Barry was to comment that he had seldom been engaged on a work which gave him so much anxiety. Despite careful test borings, the work was constantly threatened by unsuspected beds of the treacherous Thanet sand. This material, which could be firm and workable one moment, then suddenly liquefy and flow like water the next, has bedevilled civil engineers south of the Thames from Trevithick with his Thames Driftway in 1808, through the Brunels with their Rotherhithe-Wapping Tunnel, to the builders of the Jubilee Line Extension. I can do no better than quote Sir Joseph Broodbank, in his History of the Port of London. "...this sand endangered the whole river end of the dock. Holes appeared in the foreshore and in a few moments the trenches that were almost ready to receive the foundations were filled with extremely fine sand, and communication was established between the river and the works. The position threatened to be a grave one and disaster was only avoided by costly measures adopted by the engineer". Costly indeed; the Greenland Dock extension eventually cost £940,000.

1927



However, there is no doubt that it was a magnificent engineering achievement. I defy anyone standing on the bridge over Greenland Lock, not to be impressed by the massive gates and their hydraulic machinery, or the huge expanse of water which extends over 22 acres. Even on paper, the statistics impress. The lock itself is 550ft long and 80ft broad, and the dock is 2,250 ft long and 450ft wide at its maximum; it was over 35ft deep. However, in two important respects, the design was unavoidably flawed. Firstly, with the Grand Surrey Canal flowing in and out, and cuts through to South Dock, Canada Dock and Norway Dock, the longest uninterrupted run of quayside was only 800ft. Secondly, the railway connection had to be cut back to South Dock, involving double handling for any traffic to or from rail. The expense, worry and problems with the layout were not allowed to spoil the opening celebrations. After luncheon at the offices, the directors boarded a tug, and accompanied by representatives of the engineers and contractors who had worked on the project, sailed into the Greenland Lock. A large bouquet of flowers was suspended from a ribbon stretched across the dock entrance, and perched on the prow of the tug, the company chairman cut the ribbon, retrieving the bouquet. The party then sailed around the entire complex, probably aware that they were approaching the end of an era, for a Royal Commission had recently reported in favour of bringing all the docks on the river under public control. A couple of miles from "London's Larder" - the food processing factories and warehouses of Tooley Street, the Surrey Commercial Docks Co. determined to try and recoup some of the cost of the extension, by challenging for a larger share of the provision trade - particularly that from Canada, and cold stores were built to accommodate dairy products. Two Canadian shipping lines were "bribed" to leave the Victoria Dock, with the promise of silly rates, and this sparked off another round of "beggar-my-neighbour" price cuts amongst the various dock companies along the Thames, which was to weaken them all, and induce the government to force amalgamation and public ownership under the Port of London Authority in 1908.

#### ENTER THE PLA

The new body had much to accomplish, before the collection of assets it inherited, and which had grown in such a random fashion, could be forged into an efficient whole. The last years of competition had reduced revenues overall, leading to arrears of maintenance which got worse when it was known that the private company's days were numbered. Why spend shareholders money, when someone else will have to cope with the results of neglect? There was also a long standing problem with shoaling in the river - there was not much point in building deeper docks, and rebuilding locks to take vessels of greater draught, if these ships could not get up the Thames. The PLA took over dredging responsibility from the Thames Conservancy Commissioners, and over 15 years, for an expenditure of £2.5 million, succeeded in opening and keeping clear a new channel capable of taking the largest vessels which the docks could handle. It proved to be a continuous process; dredged material was taken out to the Black Deep, 30 miles from Southend and it was not until tests were carried out with radioactive tracers in 1963, that it was discovered that the tides brought most of it back again! Thereafter, dredged materials were dumped on Rainham Marshes as part of a land reclamation scheme. With the intervention of the Great War, when the odd Zeppelin caused minor damage in the area, it was to be the 1920's before any further major improvements occurred in the Surrey Docks. Despite shortages of materials, the brief post-war boom, and changes in the timber trade encouraged some investment by the PLA. The policy of constructing open sided sheds for the storage of timber, instead of leaving it in the open was continued, and in 1921 a new shed for general cargo, with an area of 75,000 square ft opened on the site of a former shipyard adjacent to Greenland Lock. Two of the old Surrey Company's surviving timber ponds were rebuilt to form the new Quebec Dock, of about 14 acres, and 2,340 ft of quayside, which opened in 1926; this is the position shown on the map on page 26.

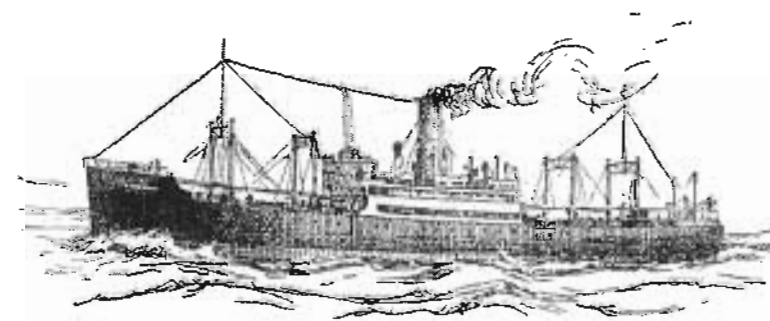
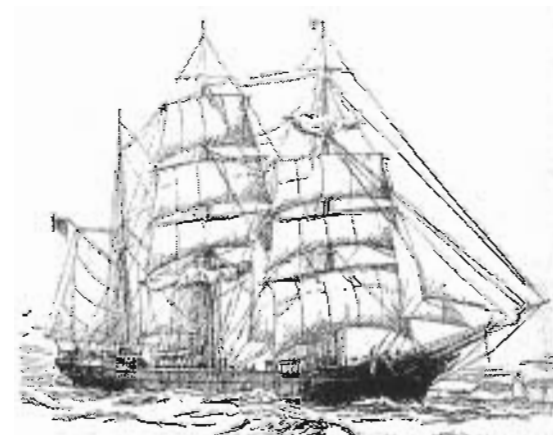
## SHIPS THAT PASSED...

Opposite are examples of just three of the tens of thousands of ships which visited the Surrey Commercial Docks over 160 years.

Top:- A typical "Onker". Right up to 1939, sailing vessels were regular visitors to Russia & Quebec Docks, and the others which mainly handled timber. Seldom a time-sensitive cargo, timber was a useful way of screwing a final bit of profit out of slow sailing vessels of often surprising antiquity and decrepitude. They were a familiar sight, working their stately way up river, deals stacked high on their decks, and often with a most alarming list because the cargo had shifted in some North Sea "Blow". They were accompanied by a continuous noise "Onk - err, Onk - err, Onk - err" from windmill-driven pumps which ejected a constant stream of water from their leaky old hulls. Hence the name. This specimen was the *Alastor*, built at Sunderland in 1875, which had spent her first twenty years making fast passages to and from Australia and New Zealand. Sold to Norwegian (Neutral in 1914-18) owners in 1895, she was arrested by the Royal Navy during the conflict for attempting to run contraband to Germany. Further changes of ownership saw a steady decline in the importance of her cargoes and in 1928 was re-flagged as Finnish for the Baltic timber trade. She was still performing this humble duty in 1938, when sketched for Frank Bowen's book *London Ship Types* by Pelham Jones.

The biggest regular visitors to Greenland Dock between the wars were the "A" class Cunard ships on the passenger and Cargo service to Canada. This is *Andania*, of 1922, 13,950 tons. *Antonia* and *Ausonia* were true sisters of hers, *Aurania*, *Ascania* and *Alaunia* were very similar. Turbine driven, and good for thirteen knots, all were taken up for war service as armed merchant cruisers or troop carriers. *Andania* was torpedoed in 1940, but the others survived. The last afloat was *Ausonia*, broken up in 1965. Illustration by J. H. Isherwood, from *North Atlantic Seaway*, by N. R. P. Bonsor.

Next in size were the Canadian Pacific cargo liners, of the *Beaver* class, *Beaverford*, *Beaverhill*, *Beaverburn*, *Beaverdale* and *Beaverbrea*, 9,956 tons. This illustration, again by Pelham Jones, is of *Beaverford*. Dating from around 1927, they were 495 ft long and 61 ft 6 in wide. The *Beavers* maintained a regular weekly service to Saint John, New Brunswick and Halifax, going up as far as Montreal, when the St. Lawrence was ice-free. They were highly unusual for their time, in that both officers and men were accommodated in the bridge deck superstructure, in small cabins. In most contemporary vessels, the crew were squeezed into cramped communal accommodation in the forecabin. Not one of the five survived the Second World War.



can be seen on this map, including the Canada Dock, Greenland Dock extension, the new lock and the road diversions which these works entailed. Note how much of the quayside area is now occupied by covered sheds, and the extent to which the surviving timber ponds have been reduced in size to provide more dry land within the estate. The practice of storing large floats of timber for years in these ponds was being rapidly abandoned. During the depression, no timber merchant could now afford to maintain large stocks, awaiting a favourable price, and the increasing use of plywood, which was replacing some of the cheaper boards and deals in popularity, meant that more dry storage was required. Acorn and Lavender Ponds were therefore deepened and amalgamated, quays were constructed, replacing the old banks revetted with timber, and several new sheds erected. The remains of Globe Pond were filled in. The Surrey Docks had always been rather "leaky" and could lose up to 2ft in depth during the course of a single tide, through seepage, lockage and evaporation. Lavender Lock was therefore stopped up, and an impounding pumping station built, with electrically driven plant to maintain water levels. This building, stripped of its machinery still survives, and is now the Lavender Dock Pumphouse Museum. All this batch of improvements were started in 1928, and came into use between then and 1934. New warehouses, only recently demolished, were built on the South quay at South Dock, and with the exception of some further shed construction, they completed the development of the Surrey Commercial Docks up to the outbreak of the Second World War.

#### FIRE FROM THE SKIES

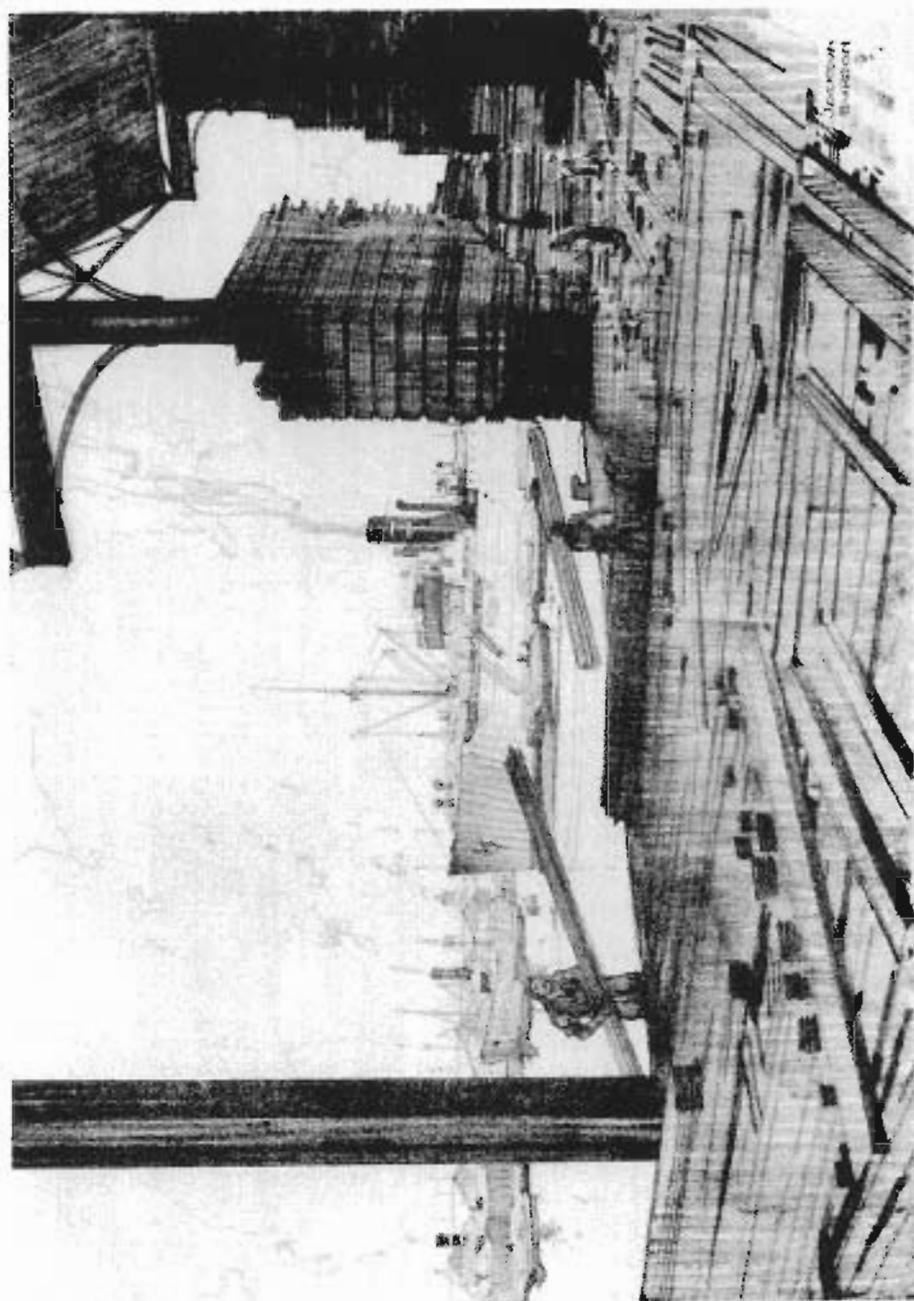
When the "Blitz" began on Saturday 7 September 1940, it heralded yet another major change in the face of Rotherhithe. Churches, schools, shops, theatres, factories, Rotherhithe Town Hall, Bermondsey Town Hall, warehouses and thousands of homes in Rotherhithe and Bermondsey were wiped out, or severely damaged, by the successive attacks of bombers, V I flying bombs, and V II rockets. At first, this was as a result of what the Americans euphemistically call "collateral damage"; the main target was the docks and riverside wharves, but the attacks soon became indiscriminate. On that first weekend, the clear intent was to destroy the stocks of timber in the Surrey Docks, for many of the bombs dropped were incendiaries, strapped to drums of oil to aid the conflagration. In this they were all too successful, creating what was later to become recognised as a firestorm. This was so hot, that window glass in buildings far from the flames shattered in the heat and strong winds generated, while vessels attempting to pass along the far side of the river suffered blistered paint work. Some people found themselves cut off by fires, and the occupants of the small LCC hospital at South Wharf (on the site of "Mr. Wells's Yard on early maps) had to be evacuated by river. The inferno spread over 250 acres, and some 42 major fires, was fought by literally hundreds of firemen from as far away as Rugby and Bristol. The two biggest individual fires tied up 300 and 130 pumps each. Throughout, very brave volunteers on top of 60ft. high steel towers plotted the fall of bombs, noting particularly the bearings of those which fell into the water and failed to explode, so that they could be located and dealt with later. That first terrible weekend was observed by Port of London Health Authority official T.L. Mackie. *"The day light exposed a terrible scene; the greater part of the timber docks, like a barren smouldering wilderness and huge warehouses completely gutted. Ships which only a few hours ago had been discharging cargoes were torn by the blast and defaced by fire. Some had been holed and sunk, showing only a small part above the water. Steel girders were twisted to indescribable shapes and surviving masonry lay at dangerous angles. Alas, this shambles proved to be more than unsightly wreckage, for the bombs and fire had claimed toll of human life, and the bodies still lay among this charred debris".* And of course, that night, and for 56 successive nights, the bombers returned.

Normal commercial traffic at the Surrey Docks virtually ceased for the duration; many dock workers were moved away from London to work at Cairnryan and Faslane, the emergency harbours constructed in Scotland. Cold stores (see page 17) and timber sheds were destroyed, while South Lock was so badly damaged that it could not be used. However this was turned to advantage, as the dock could easily be converted into a temporary drydock. Drained, with a layer of hard-core rubble spread along the bottom (there was no shortage of this!) South Dock was used for the construction of massive "Phoenix" units for the Mulberry Harbour prior to D-Day. When completed, the dock was flooded and the units were floated out into Greenland Dock through the Steel Yard Cut - a tricky job, with only 9 ins clearance. The devastated quay sides in Russia Dock were excavated to make further building basins available, separated from the dock itself by banks which could be removed. More "Mulberry" units were built here, as were concrete mine sweeping barges (see page 17) for the Admiralty, and a new caisson for the drydock at Singapore, in case the Japanese should destroy the existing one before surrender. At centre yard, prefabricated wooden MINCA (made in Canada) barges were assembled. Throughout, R.H Green & Silley Weir and Harland & Wolf, repaired ships in the Surrey docks, often under the most difficult circumstances. One badly damaged vessel, Empress Tristram was hit twice by V I flying bombs, once on 23 June 1944 at Brunswick Yard, when five people were killed, and again on 12 July with another six fatalities, while under repair in Greenland Dock. The famous old riverside pub The "Dog and Duck", between the Greenland and South Dock entrances fell victim to the second V II rocket to fall on Bermondsey at 7.45 a.m. on 31 October 1944. The last V I to land on the Surrey Docks hit the roof of No.1 Tea Warehouse, Plough Way on 5 March 1945...

#### A FALSE DAWN

The Rotherhithe and Surrey Docks which emerged from World War Two were virtually unrecognisable. The population was severely reduced - many of those evacuated, or who moved away to work did not come back, and most of those who remained were in urgent need of rehousing. Bermondsey Borough Council, since 1899, the local authority for Rotherhithe, had begun replacing some of the worst housing between the wars. A few "cottage" type houses with small gardens were built, but the main effort went into large new blocks of flats like the Amos, Acorn, Lavender and Redriff estates, although curiously even this last, completed in 1940, had solid fuel cooking ranges and gas lighting. Many of these flats were damaged to a greater or lesser extent. The densely packed 19th century streets elsewhere in Rotherhithe had so many gaps, that it was probably more logical to clear the lot away, and start again..

At the Surrey Docks, the PLA began a process of rebuilding, but it was a false dawn; years later, work had still not been completed. A PLA map of 1955 (not reproduced) still showed vast empty spaces where timber sheds had once stood, and even isolated patches still shown as "Ruins". Neither the PLA nor the trades unions fully appreciated the impact which changes in cargo handling - palletisation and containerisation - introduced by the Americans for moving military supplies during the war, would have on traditional methods of dock working. Of course, the dock workers were against any form of mechanisation which might lead to job losses, with the threat of industrial action slowing progress. Col. R.B Oram, the Surrey Docks Superintendent (1951-1956), managed to introduce tractors and trailers for timber handling, by obtaining some for "internal and engineering" use. After the workers had seen the ease with which the machines moved loads, he was one day approached by a deputation threatening industrial action if they were not made available for commercial traffic! A mobile crane soon followed. However it was all too little and too late. Small timber ships were becoming uneconomic and bigger vessels were entering the trade.



"In The Surrey Commercial Docks" a pencil sketch by Jackson Burton, 1934. Originally published in *The Port of London*, by Alan Bell

These days, two and a half ship berths at Tilbury, with a handful of men and modern equipment, handle more timber per year than the entire Surrey Commercial Dock system ever managed at its busiest

The ravages of war had hardly been fully restored in the Surreys before the first closures occurred. Imports of 1,617,000 tons in 1965, fell to 1,206,000 in 1966 and only 960,000 in 1967. The same year, Surrey Basin and lock were filled in, as were parts of Lady Dock and Russia Dock. Norway Dock was infilled the following year. Two years later, in April 1970, the PLA sought approval to close the rest. Although it was December before the necessary Act of Parliament was passed, most cargo services had ceased by the end of September. The very last ship, a Russian timber carrier *Kandalakshales* left on 22 December. While still in PLA ownership, the sheds and warehouses on the estate remained in use for storage and some areas were leased out to small businesses - mainly of the type usually found in railway arches. By 1977, the whole estate had been sold to the Greater London Council and to the London Borough of Southwark, which had taken over as the local authority from Bermondsey Borough Council in 1965. Matters proceeded slowly. Short leases granted by the PLA were honoured, and when these ran out, with no firm decisions taken on the future of the area, were renewed. Some new housing was provided, and a new road (Salter Road) was laid out, parallel to the narrow Rotherhithe Street, but about 100 yards inland (1978-1981). Russia Dock was completely filled in, landscaped and planted as woodland, while Stave Dock became a football stadium and recreation ground. Ideas for a World Trade Mart, or a Channel Tunnel Terminal were floated and sank. Eventually government took a hand and on 1 July 1981, the London Docklands Development Corporation came into being.



Surrey Basin and Entrance Lock being filled in, 1967, view looking west towards Rotherhithe Gasworks. Photo:- Ron Crew.

# THE LONDON DOCKLANDS DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION

This body, a typical 1980's QUANGO, was to acquire most of the vacant land in Docklands, north and south of the river, and using considerable legal powers, was charged with regenerating the area by attracting private investment. It would take a longer booklet than this to describe what happened over the next 18 years, and the record of the LDDC is still the subject of debate, but it is worth quoting from the late Dave Clark, writing in *Our Side of the River*, published by the "Rotherhithe Community Planning Centre" in 1986. "...problems were confounded by Southwark Council's political attitude to the LDDC. The current Labour Councillors were elected in 1982, on a left wing platform... Southwark's Labour Councillors disapproved of the wide powers given to the LDDC. It could, for example, "vest" land, or compulsorily purchase it from the Council, often at a lower sum than the Council had paid for it... The new Council came enthusiastically to power in May 1982, just as the LDDC was equally enthusiastically rolling up its sleeves in North Southwark. The Council decided not to talk to the Corporation... The ruling Labour Group's real base was in Peckham and for a time North Southwark seemed to have been forgotten." Groups of local people were forced to fight their own battles with the LDDC over the future of Rotherhithe, resulting in several confrontations including those at Cherry Garden Pier and Swan Lane, where significant improvements were won for local communities. The map inside the back cover shows the Docks area towards the end of the LDDC's regime. Like the Corporation, or loath it, whatever the LDDC's failings, it was always strong on "heritage", and there are several survivals which would either have been lost, or now be derelict without their action. Greenland Lock and Dock have already been mentioned, and there are many interesting survivals in terms of bridges, bollards and hydraulic machinery to be found on a stroll round. A particularly successful effort was the excavation of the Albion channel, running between Surrey Basin and Canada Water. Here, the granite coping stones for almost the whole of one side of Albion Dock have been preserved, at a slightly higher level than those edging the new ornamental canal. Similarly, much of the quay edge along one side of Russia Dock has been preserved. A walk along either soon brings home not only the massive scale of the engineering involved in construction, but also the almost unbelievable changes which have been wrought in the area in recent years. In the case of the Albion Channel, an additional bonus was that the excavated material



This small drydock, for repairing barges and lighters, began life as the cut between Albion Dock and the Canada timber Pond in 1860. When the latter was rebuilt as Canada Dock, (opened 1876) a new cut was made, and this one converted. When Surrey Quays Phase II was planned, attempts were made to have it preserved, but it now lies buried under one of the "Pentathlon" buildings, a puzzle for future archaeologists... Photo:- Author 1991



The Albion Channel, looking towards Surrey Basin. The two lines of coping stones at a higher level to the right and left, mark the edges of the cut between Albion and Canada Docks, opened in 1876. Photo:- Author 1992.

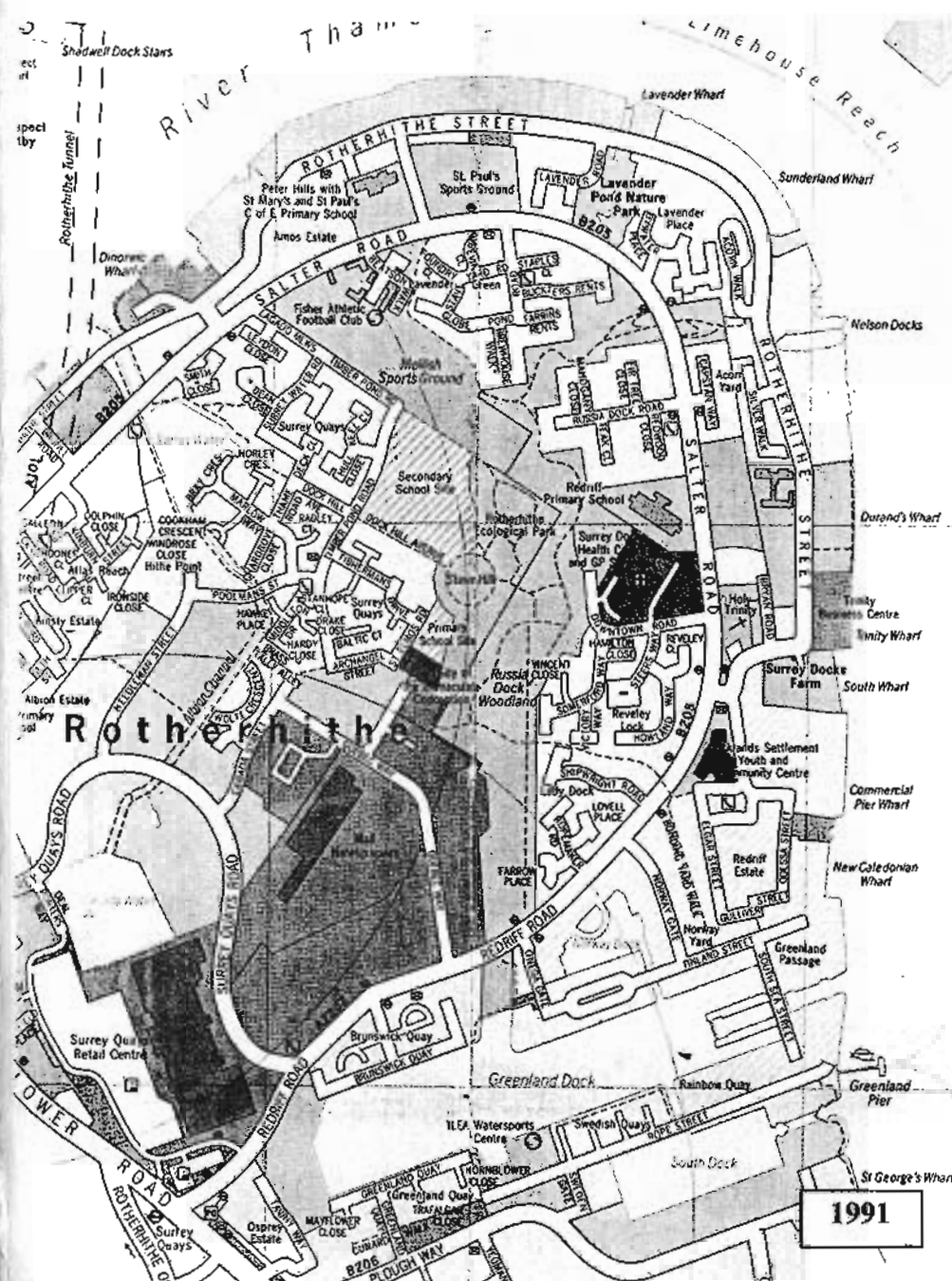
was formed into Slave Hill. This artificial eminence affords views over the area which, in the days when the docks were active, could only be obtained from the masthead of a ship. The former Grand Surrey Docks and Canal entrance and basin of 1860, filled in by the PLA, have been rescued and preserved, although the lock is now closed, protected by a concrete apron and dam. The end of Canada Dock has been reduced in depth, and has an area of reed lined bank which provides a habitat for water fowl. Only this week (end of June 1999), I have had much enjoyment here, from watching a family of four Coot chicks, each with its eager beak thrust over the edge of their island nest, at 90 degrees to its fellow, while dutiful parents swam slowly round in circles, feeding each in turn.

Fuelled by the boom of the late 80's, much of the remaining docks area was developed for housing, schools and recreational areas, and those sections of the map inside the back cover, which were vacant at the time, have now nearly all been built on. There is some industry, notably the enormous Daily Mail Printing works, at what used to be Quebec Dock; a major shopping centre on the bulk of Canada Dock, and a leisure park with cinema, pubs restaurants, bingo and ten pin bowling on the former Canada Yard South.

What is perhaps surprising, is that despite having been virtually wiped clean several times, there are still so many features from earlier maps of Rotherhithe which can be discerned today. Rotherhithe Street has been widened, yet can still be recognised on the map, as can places where it diverted inland to make room for the drydocks and building ships of long vanished shipyards; the grid plan of the Duke of Bedford's failed housing development can still be discerned in the layout of the Redriff estate; the shape of many of the docks and the course of the upper part of the Grand Surrey Canal can still be followed, and on a quiet evening at the Lavender Pond Nature Reserve, it does not require much imagination to conjure up the kind of scene described by Fox-Smith which I quoted earlier ..

## SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Map of London & Suburbs 1888*, by G. W. Bacon, Harry Margary, (Reprint), 1987  
*Thames Cavalcade*, by L. M. Bates, Terence Dalton, 1991  
*The Thames on Fire*, by L. M. Bates, Terence Dalton, 1985  
*Memorials... A History of... Rotherhithe*, by E. J. Beck, Cambridge UP, 1907  
*Port of London 1909-1934*, by A. Bell, PLA, 1934  
*Parish of St Mary Rotherhithe Charities*, by E. Blick, Author, 1848  
*The Blitz Then & Now; Vol. I, II & III*, by W. G. Ramsay, (Editor), Battle of Britain  
 Prints International, 1987, 1988, 1989.  
*Descriptive Map of London Poverty, 1889*, by C. Booth, London Topographical Society,  
 (Reprint), 1984.  
*London Ship Types*, by F. C. Bowen, East Ham Echo, 1938  
*History of the Port of London*, by J. G. Broodbank, Daniel O'Connor, 1921  
*Our Side of the River*, by D. Clark (Editor), Rotherhithe Community Planning Centre,  
 1986  
*Docks & Ports 2 - London*, by W. P. Clegg, Ian Allan, 1987  
*New Plan of London, Improved to 1847*, by Cross, Borough of Tower Hamlets Libraries  
 (Reprint) 1988.  
*New Plan of London Improved to 1829*, by Cruchley, Borough of Tower Hamlets  
 Libraries, (Reprint), 1983  
*New Plan of London Improved to 1839*, ditto, Borough of Tower Hamlets Libraries,  
 (Reprint), 1983  
*Thames Side Yesterdays*, by C. Fox-Smith, F. Lewis, 1945  
*Historical Notice of the Commercial Docks*, by N. Gould, 1844  
*Explore the Natural Environment... Surrey Docks*, by G. Grant, LDDC, 1989  
*London Docks 1800-1980*, by I. S. Greeves, Thomas Telford, 1980  
*History of the Surrey Commercial Docks*, by J. Griffin, 1877  
*Old Rotherhithe* L. Hobbs (Unpublished MS in Southwark Local Studies Library).  
*Plan of London 1794*, by R. Horwood, (Revised by Fadens, 1813), Harry Margary,  
 (Reprint), 1985  
*Laurie & Whittle's New Map of London, 1809*, Borough of Tower Hamlets Libraries  
 (Reprint) 1988  
*Laurie & Whittle's New Map of London, 1819*, ditto 1983  
*Dockland Life* by C. Elners & A. Werner, Mainstream, 1991  
*Lure & Lore of London River*, by A. G. Linney, Sampson Low, 1932  
*Greenland Dock - a Framework for Development*, Conran Roche, LDDC, 1984  
*Docklands Heritage*, by Lyders & Harrison (Eds.), LDDC 1987  
*History & Archaeology of Ports*, by G. Jackson, World's Work 1983  
*Lloyds List 250th Anniversary Supplement*, Lloyds List, 1984  
*The Great Dock Strike 1889*, by T. McCarthy, Weidenfeld & Nicholson 1988  
*Biographical Dictionary of Railway Engineers*, by J. Marshall David & Charles. 1978  
*Mayhew's London*, by P. Quennell, Spring Books, 1969  
*The Dockers Tragedy*, by R. B. Oram, Hutchinson 1970  
*Port of London Yesterday and Today*, by D. J. Owen, PLA, 1927  
*Plan of Surrey Commercial Docks 1955*, PLA, Edward Stanford, (Reprint), 1987  
*London's Docks*, by J. Pudney, Thames & Hudson, 1975  
*London's Lost Riverscape*, by C. Elners & A. Werner, Viking 1988  
*Plan of the Cities of London & c.* by J. Rocque, Harry Margary, (Reprint), 1981  
*Stanfords Library Map of London 1862*, Stanford, Harry Margary, (Reprint), 1980  
*The Russells in Bloomsbury*, by G. S. Thomson, Jonathan Cape 1940  
*London Recollected 1878*, by E. Walford, Alderman Press. (Reprint), 1987  
*ADT Architecture Guide - Docklands*, S. Williams, ADT Press, 1990



---

PUBLISHED TO MARK THE 300TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE  
HOWLAND GREAT WET DOCK 1699/1999, AND THE  
30TH ANNIVERSARY OF CLOSURE, 1970/2000.

---

Three hundred years ago, an unusual marriage of great political significance, resulted in the building of the Howland Great Wet Dock. This was not a cargo handling facility, but was intended to provide a safe haven for ships to lie-up between voyages, and undergo routine maintenance. Within a few years, its value was demonstrated during a violent storm, when only minor damage was sustained by a single vessel in the dock, and dozens of ships in the open river were wrecked. The Howland became a base for the whaling industry, being renamed "Greenland" as a result; after rebuilding early in the 19th century it was the main asset of the Commercial Docks Company, and was enlarged early in the 20th century to become the largest dock in the Surrey Commercial system, which had been formed following a period of ruinous competition. This booklet outlines the history of the Surrey Commercial Docks, from 1699, through the private company era, ownership by the Port of London Authority, devastation in wartime, rebuilding, closure in 1970, and eventual redevelopment.

STILL AVAILABLE IN THIS SERIES:-

SHIPBUILDING IN ROTHERHITHE

- AN HISTORICAL INTRODUCTION £2-75p (Inc. P&P)
- THE NELSON DOCKYARD (Revised Edition, 1999) £2-95p (Inc. P&P)
- GREENLAND DOCK & BARNARD'S WHARF  
(Revised Edition, 1999) £2-95p (Inc. P&P)

HISTORICAL NOTICE OF THE COMMERCIAL DOCKS (By Nathaniel Gould, 1844. Facsimile reprint with additional maps, illustrations and introductory notes. £3-20p Inc. P&P). [Please make cheques payable to "S.Rankin"].

In Preparation:-

- FROM BULLHEAD DOCK TO THE PAGEANTS - PART I.

For details of future publications, send SAE  
to:- 4, Helier Court, Hithe Point, Rotherhithe,  
LONDON, SE16 1PE

**£2-75p.**

---

Printed & Published by Dockside Studio; July, 1999.  
Copyright :- Stuart Rankin

---