PAPERS READ AT THE 48th LAMAS LOCAL HISTORY CONFERENCE HELD AT THE MUSEUM OF LONDON IN NOVEMBER 2013: 'THE RIVER AND PORT OF LONDON'

RE-INVENTION AND CHANGE: THE PORT OF LONDON 1790–1938

Chris Ellmers

This paper cautioned against any simple, grand, positive narrative of London's port development in favour of one that might be seen as a 'great game', akin to that of chess.

London's first trading docks

Historians have drawn heavily on the grand narrative of port development presented in John Pudney's *London's Docks* (1975), which moved along, apparently logically, from negative cause to positive effect. It began with the chaotic state of the river and quays in the 1790s — as depicted by his heroes, William Vaughan and Patrick Colquhoun — and ended with magnificent trading docks.

Both Vaughan and Colquhoun constructed polemics of a port suffering from delays and overcrowding (Vaughan), and depravations by 'delinquent' portworkers (Colquhoun). Others challenged such views. At the 1796 Port Enquiry, Edward Ogle cogently argued for the reform of the river port, rather than expensive new docks.

The 1799 Port Enquiry, however, endorsed the proposed West India Docks and the London Docks. So began the transformation of the port. Massive trading docks assumed the dominant place of the old riverside Legal Quays and Sufferance Wharves. A 'London dock mania' marked the beginnings of London Docklands.

The first generation docks included: *West India Docks*, Poplar (1802); *London Docks*, Wapping (1805); *East India Docks*, Blackwall (1806); *Commercial Docks*, Rotherhithe (1807 onwards); *Grand Surrey Canal and Basin*, Rotherhithe (1807 onwards); *East Country Dock*, Rotherhithe (1811); and *Regents Canal Dock*, Limehouse (1820).

The London Docks originated as Vaughan's 'Merchants' Dock' (1793), intended for all valuable cargoes. Robert Milligan's 1794 proposal for the West India trade on the remote Isle of Dogs, however, emerged as a rival. This was later backed by George Hibbert, other leading West India merchants, and the City Corporation. The 1799 Port Enquiry supported both schemes, but prioritised the West India Docks. To help secure its capital funding, Parliament agreed a 21-year 'compulsory clause' relating to all West India import cargoes, except tobacco. This split London's West India trade and the wider trading community.

Subsequent 21-year trading monopolies supported the London Dock Company (tobacco, wines and brandies, and non-East and West India rice) and the East India Dock Company (East India cargoes). The Warehousing Act of 1803, which created Revenue bonded warehouses, favoured these docks.

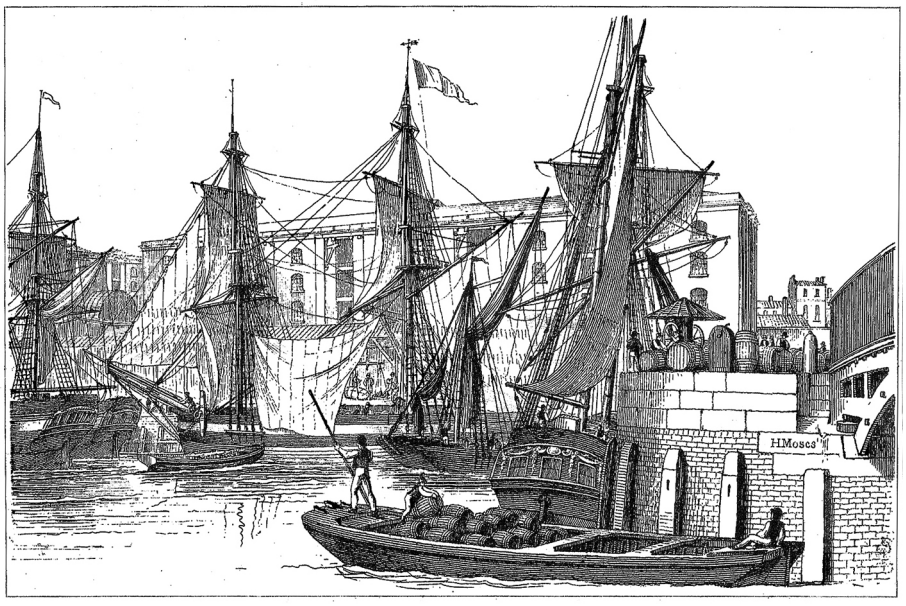

Fig 1. The North Quay of the London Docks, by Henry Moses, 1825 (Author's collection)

Hibbert promulgated the positivist model of port improvement, describing his colleagues as 'gentlemen who had undertaken with a sort of Quixotic spirit, the rescuing of the West India trade from … plunderage'. Hibbert conveniently ignored the intense rivalry with the Wapping developers, the divisive split caused by his Company's compulsory clause, and the fact that it was essential for funding. The positivist model also ignored the entrenched relationship with West India slavery. Plantation profits were invested in both the West India and London Docks and some investors engaged in many slaving voyages before abolition in 1807. The West India Docks remained the main destination of plantation products until the abolition of slavery in 1834.

Government compensation awards to river port operators provided another subsidy to the monopoly dock companies. The owners of lighters and barges, however, gained free access to the docks through 'free water clauses'.

Lacking protective monopolies, other docks focused on bulk cargoes of imported softwoods and grain. Until the dock monopolies expired, the Legal Quays and Sufferance Wharves handled less valuable dutiable cargoes and the coastwise trade.

Competition arrives

Dock monopolies expired between 1823 and 1827. Concerted opposition to the West India Dock Company's monopoly extension attempt came from the London Dock Company, the Commercial Dock Company, and the leading free trader, Thomas Tooke. Alarmed by its huge 'surplus fund' of £448,148, Parliament rejected the Company's petition, arguing that it 'opens the way for free competition among the Docks'. Laissez-faire and free trade became increasingly linked to an expanding British economy

A new 'free trade' dock also emerged on the very edge of the City. St Katharine's Dock (1828–1829) was the brainchild of Sir John Hall and Thomas Tooke. The scheme, however, was flawed: foreign trade was not buoyant; the existing docks had over-capacity; and the site was built-up, containing 1,250 tenements, over 11,000 people, two graveyards and the medieval foundation of St Katharine. Despite opposition from the London Dock Company, the Commercial Dock Company, the Grand Surrey Canal Company, the Sufferance Wharfingers, and the Fellowship Porters, the dock was approved. The small and restricted site

presented serious funding, engineering, and building challenges. Early profits fell below expectations.

The loss of the dock monopolies, the opening of St Katharine's Docks, the re-emergence of the riverside Legal Quays and Sufferance Wharves as players, together with the increasing significance of the free water clause, created a chill wind of competition. The West India Docks and the London Docks undertook building and development schemes. In 1836, the West India, East India and St Katharine's Dock Companies purchased some of the East India Company's City warehouses to advance their competing far eastern trades. The East and West India Dock Companies amalgamated in 1838.

Free trade increased in the 1840s with the repeal of many duties, the Corn Laws (1846) and the Navigation Acts (1849). After 1824 the Legal Quays regained their powers. The erstwhile free trader, Sir John Hall, vigorously opposed this. Moves to extend powers to south side Sufferance Wharves were opposed by Hall, the London Dock Company, the East & West India Dock Company, and the Legal Quay Wharfingers. The dock companies repeatedly tried to repeal their free water clauses. From 1853, leading Sufferance Wharves gained wider bonding privileges, which resulted in extensive rebuilding.

Boom and bust: 1850–1900

Whilst foreign trade shipping entries increased from 2.0–9.2 million tons across 1850–1900, there were many crises. Not only were docks competing with each other and the increasingly successful riverside wharves, but a radical new competitor appeared with the opening of the Victoria Dock (1855), downriver on the Plaistow Marshes. This heralded a second generation of bigger docks, designed for steamships, railway connections and hydraulic power. In 1864 the London and St Katharine's Dock Companies merged and purchased the Victoria Dock. The East & West India Dock Company could only respond with the under-equipped South West India Dock (1870) having failed to purchase the Millwall Dock (opened 1868).

In 1881, the London & St Katharine Dock Company extended the Victoria Dock with the Royal Albert Dock. In response, the East & West India Dock Company opened the large new deepwater Tilbury Docks (1886), 20 miles downriver. Financial ruin ensued, forcing a working arrangement with its old rival as the London & India Docks Joint Committee. Separate protective and working arrangements were made with the other docks.

From 1864 the successful Rotherhithe docks — with their staples of timber and grain — operated as the Surrey Commercial Dock Company, which opened the large new Canada Dock (1876).

A new era

In 1901, the London & India Docks Company superseded the Joint Committee. Larger dock groupings made sense in terms of trade and building investment. Although foreign tonnages stood at around 9 million tons in 1900, 75% of all dock cargoes were lightered to the competing riverside wharves.

Port users complained of insufficient facilities, delays in ship handling, poorly dredged river channels, limited railway and lighterage links, excessive dock and port charges, and a confusing division of port responsibilities. A misguided attempt by the London & India Docks Joint Committee to remove the free water clause resulted in fierce opposition and a Royal Commission on the port (1900–1902). This bore fruit in 1909 when the Port of London Authority (PLA) assumed responsibility for the docks and tidal river.

Under the authoritarian control of Lord Devonport, the PLA began an extensive works programme on new dock quays and sheds, channel dredging and wreck clearing. The Great War delayed the King George V Dock (1921) and the new Head Office (1922). Other port improvements continued apace. Although London was overtaken by New York, total port tonnages increased from 18 to 44 million tons, across 1909–1938. The Second World War, however, saw London's port facilities and communities subjected to the horrors of total war and devastation. A new phase of port history had begun.

'PRIMUS OMNIUM': THE HISTORY OF POLICING THE RIVER THAMES

Robert Jeffries

This presentation covered the condition of the Thames in the late 18th century and the reasons why London's river required its own police presence, some 31 years before the rest of London.

In the late 18th century London was the wealthy capital of arguably the richest and most powerful nation in the world at that time, and the Thames was its beating heart and its super highway. The river was called a 'forest of masts', and the saying went that you could walk across the river on the decks of all the ships that crowded into the river. It was estimated that in 1794, 13,444 ships came into London bringing cargoes from all over the world. It was also estimated that there were never less than 1,000 vessels in port at any one time. These vessels would compete for space alongside the 1,419ft of legal quay space that existed between London Bridge and the Tower. Those that could not get alongside the legal quays would anchor on the river and wait to be unloaded by an army of 'lumpers'. There were approximately 35,000 workers who earned their living in this manner. They would transfer the cargoes from the vessels into barges known as 'lighters' and the cargoes would be taken ashore. The problem was that about 11,000 of these lumpers were thought to be thieves, who would seize any opportunity to steal anything they could get their hands on and make a profit by selling the stolen property on to 'receivers', who would pay them only a fraction of the property's true worth. The lumpers themselves, however, did not necessarily consider that they were doing anything wrong. To them, they were merely taking their time honoured and traditional perks of the job. It was estimated that thefts taking place on the Thames were to the value of £500,000 per annum (about £35,000,000 current value) and the biggest losers were the merchants who traded in the West Indies, whose annual loss was about half the total. It was also estimated that the total value of cargo, shipping and rigging on the Thames in a year was about £70,000,000 (about £5 billion in current value).

Lumpers were not the only river workers who, it was claimed, were taking advantage of the lack of security on the Thames. Other 'delinquents' were operating in the port. The most audacious of these were known as 'river pirates'. There were also gangs known as 'night plunderers', 'light horsemen', 'heavy horsemen', 'mudlarks', 'game watermen' and 'game customs officers'. Each of these classes of criminal had their own ways of operating and preying on the vessels lying unprotected on the river for up to six weeks at a time.

Patrick Colquhoun was a Scottish born merchant who by the 1790s was employed as a magistrate at the Queen's Square Magistrate's Court in Westminster. In 1794 he published his *Treatise on Policing the Metropolis*. In this work he examined London's penal system and all the various criminal activities or 'depredations' that were taking place in London at that time. This included a chapter on 'River Plunder' and he made full use of his fascination with statistics to create elaborate lists and tables enumerating the number and tonnage of vessels entering the port and the type of cargoes they carried. It was Colquhoun who calculated all the figures used in the earlier paragraphs and who named the classes of criminal above. Colquhoun's treatise was a great success and was read by many in the upper ranks of society.

John Harriott was a very different man from Colquhoun. He was an Essex land owner and farmer. He was also an inventor but most importantly he was an adventurer. His travels took him around the world and he eventually rose to the rank of captain in the East India Company Army, before being invalided out of the army and returning to his lands in Essex. Harriott was one of the many people to read Colquhoun's treatise on London's criminality and he was particularly struck by the volume of criminal activity that was affecting cargoes being brought into the Thames. To his practical mind the answer seemed simple. 'Why was there not an organised presence on the river specifically to stop such thefts occurring?' Harriott swiftly devised a plan to put a semi-military body of men onto the Thames to counter these thefts. He then sought to bring his plan to the attention of members of the government, the City

Fig 2. Wapping Police Office, 1798: Anon chalk drawing (By permission of Thames Police Museum)

of London Corporation, in fact anyone he thought would listen. However, nobody was particularly interested in listening to what he had to say. It seems that his plans were considered too expensive and labour intensive to be of any real use and it was also considered that his plans were tantamount to putting a Police Force onto the streets of London, and that was seen by many as a dangerous threat to civil liberties in the capital. Harriott however, was not a man who took rejection easily and he arranged a meeting with Colquhoun in an attempt to convince him that his plans really would prove a deterrent to criminality on the river. Colquhoun was immediately struck by Harriott's energy and boundless enthusiasm and could see a good degree of merit in his ideas. Colquhoun and Harriott together refined the original idea and produced a smaller, less expensive plan that more closely resembled a modern system of policing as we would know it today.

The proposed marine police would consist of three parts:

1 A judicial section of two magistrates (Colquhoun and Harriott) and some clerks.

2 A marine section to patrol the river in rowing galleys, with the galleys rowed by 'watermen' and supervised by 'surveyors'.

3 A lumping section that replaced the old

lumpers with a more honest breed that would be subject to more stringent checks, but which in return would receive a higher rate of pay.

This was the basic plan that was laid before the Home Secretary, the Duke of Portland, and it was agreed that this new system of policing the Thames could be trialled, but that the Government would only pay for the magistrates, the rest of the plan would have to be privately funded. The West India Merchants and Planters (who were the major losers in the thefts) were approached and they agreed to lay out the £4,000 required for a year's trial and on 2 July 1798 the West India Merchant and Planters Marine Police Institute came into existence with its headquarters located at 259 Wapping High Street.

The embryonic police force was an immediate success and Colquhoun estimated that the new force saved the merchants some £100,000 in the first year of operation. In 1800 the Marine Police Act allowed the Marine Police to protect all shipping on the Thames and not just those vessels belonging to the merchants dealing in the West Indian trade.

The Marine Police of the River Thames went from strength to strength. In 1829 Peel introduced his own system of policing to London and before doing so sought the advice and opinion of the Wapping force. In 1839 the Marine Police were absorbed into the Metropolitan Police and became Thames Division of the Metropolitan Police which continued to operate from its headquarters at Wapping, and from ex-naval hulks, strategically located on the river to allow more efficient coverage of the river.

Harriott and Colquhoun's Thames Marine Police represent the first organised body of police in this country. Every civilian police force in the world today, which operates on the preventative policing model, whereby the primary object of an efficient police force is the prevention of crime, can trace its roots back to Wapping in 1798. The Marine Police Unit of the Metropolitan Police Service still operates from its original Wapping headquarters in Wapping High Street.

LOCAL HISTORY AND THE ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY OF THE RIVER THAMES, 1960–2010

Vanessa Taylor

In June 1969 a petroleum officer from Thurrock Urban District Council noticed that the figures for crude naphtha at ESSO's riverside plant at Purfleet were not adding up. 200,000 gallons seemed to be missing from its storage tanks. ESSO were alerted to a possible leak underground. According to Essex River Authority minutes, the company took little action until naphtha turned up in the chalk at Greenlands Quarry a quarter of a mile away. Then at the end of the following month it appeared in the water supply of the neighbouring cement company. The source of the leak was eventually found in a pipeline for transferring naphtha from ships to the riverbank. For the River Authority this highlighted the more general problem of pollution of groundwater in the chalk outcrops along the heavily industrialised lower Thames. They had been pressing for legislation to control the pollution of underground water but were opposed by the Ministry for Housing and Local Government, and by local authorities concerned about their own waste disposal. In spring of the following year, much of the naphtha was still unaccounted for and trickling into Greenlands Quarry.[1]

Firms dealing in petroleum and other liquid hydrocarbons became established along the Thames estuary from at least the 1880s. The Thames marshes were favoured for 'nuisance' trades, being outside residential areas and their legal restrictions. As commercial interests proliferated here, they became increasingly interlocked with their neighbours. The Anglo-American Oil Company (ESSO from 1951) set up camp at Purfleet in 1888, between Thames Board Mills and the Tunnel Portland Cement Company. This incident illustrates one of the most important features of rivers and groundwater: the way they connect 'involuntary neighbours' as David Kinnersley has put it (Kinnersley 1988, 2).

The LAMAS lecture followed a two-year ESRC-funded research project undertaken by the author together with Sarah Palmer at Greenwich Maritime Institute: 'Running

the River Thames: London, Stakeholders and the Environmental Governance of the Thames, 1960–2010', which looked at the changing relationship between different communities or 'stakeholders' and policy-making on the river. The lecture considered how local history, specifically, can help us understand the Thames; and what can thinking about the river as an environment add to our understanding of local history? Environmental history here means simply the interaction of natural and historical processes. How have flooding, pollution, water supply and river ecology been debated and affected by different groups of people, from politicians to local residents?

Four aspects of the River Thames' relationship to local history were considered. Firstly, the river cuts across local boundaries; river-based and land-based authorities do not match up. The Thames flows through ten main local and highway authorities on its way from Gloucestershire to London, 14 within Greater London, and still more in Essex and Kent. Who should make decisions about the river? Secondly, as the ESSO case shows, rivers and water connect communities by flows of water, pollution and refuse. Thirdly, communities are not necessarily local. Rivers are multi-functional, providing water supply, land drainage, drainage for sewage and other waste, navigation and trade, recreational space, habitats or 'eco-systems', and riverside development opportunities (and all the risks related to these). This creates a highly diverse set of communities. Fourthly, environments are always *local* — things happen in specific places — but they are often connected to a much bigger picture. The fortunes of the 19th-century Thames marshes were linked to those of the Port of London: ESSO's storage tanks were originally built to store kerosene shipped from New York to fuel England's paraffin lamps.

The Thames at the start of our period was in a wretched state. Long stretches of the tidal river in the late 1940s and '50s were 'biologically dead', with no oxygen in the summer to sustain life. The war had battered the port and river. The London County Council (LCC) was discharging inadequately treated sewerage into the river, alongside other pollution. Foul-smelling hydrogen sulphide caused complaints in hot weather. Recent droughts had intensified official anxiety about growing demand for water. Concerns led to government-backed surveys and major investment in the LCC's sewerage system (Minister for Housing and Local Government 1961; Water Pollution Research Laboratory 1964).

Despite the widespread nature of these problems, one of the interesting things here is how very localised the causes also were. By the early 1960s the Thames was not showing the improvement expected given the extensive work. Then in October 1963 a major source of pollution was discovered at Middlesex County Council's treatment plant at Mogden, Isleworth. An illegal connection was found to have been made around 1939 which was allowing sewage sludge to drain directly into the Thames, by-passing both treatment and monitoring. To make matters worse, the pipe-work had been covered over with timber as a war-time air raid precaution. 60% more sewage was estimated to be entering the river from Mogden than had been thought, causing last-minute recalculations in the Thames survey. Only after this misconnection was rectified in 1965, along with the completion of LCC works, did conditions in the river improve and fish start to return (Port of London Authority 1967, 12–14).

The Thames project explored relationships of power and dependency between communities that the river makes possible. The lower estuary has long been a service area for London. Its low-lying marshes have been 'reclaimed' with London's refuse and dredged silt from the port. Sewage sludge was dumped in the outer estuary itself from 1889 to 1998. The late 1960s saw major new plans emanating from London, from the seaport and airport proposals for Maplin Sands — opposed by locals and environmentalists — to the GLC's landfill plans. These have strong echoes in Boris Johnson's current plans for a 'floating airport' and other estuary airport schemes.

We looked too at the 1973 Water Act, which replaced hundreds of local public bodies across England and Wales with ten Regional Water Authorities responsible for water supply, sewerage and pollution control. For many, this legislation was another nail in the coffin of local autonomy. What happened to local interests when the 5,000

Fig 3. Environmental Agency 'inter-tidal terracing' at Greenwich Peninsula, 2011. Background: Canary Wharf, scene of conflicts between central government and local groups over dockland development in the 1970s and 80. (Photo: author)

square mile Thames catchment area came under one organisation: Thames Water Authority? We found that 'river-basin management' may have made it easier to manage resources for the benefit of major towns and cities in the region (for example, by making more water available), but that democracy along the river is far from dead. 'Civil society' continues to provide an avenue for local people, whether through reservoir protest groups and recent opposition to the Thames Tideway Tunnel (the 'supersewer') or through tributary restoration groups. The power available to specific groups is variable over time — like a game of snakes and ladders — through changes in planning laws, for example, reducing or enhancing local powers, or the emergence of European Union environmental directives which can strengthen the hand of local groups.

Detailed local research shows the crucial role people with strong local ties play in custodianship for local environments — sometimes known as NIMBYism. It reveals how landscapes have been shaped by politicians and businesses, and how different communities along the Thames have been tied involuntarily to their neighbours, but

also what they have tried to do about it. The project team visited several fantastic archives: from the Museum of London Docklands and London Metropolitan Archives, to record offices across the Thames region. A public website is being created to share information on these local and national historical records. 'Researching the River Thames' is a guide to sources for the river, with information on its governing bodies and interest groups, and links to a wide range of archives, maps and publications, as well as films, free to watch online: (www.gre.ac.uk/riverthamesguide).

Note

[1] Essex Record Office, Essex Rivers Authority Minutes: River Conservator's Report to 31st May 1969, Item 922; Minutes of Meeting, 20 March 1970, Item 367.

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