

Bermondsey Street Back Stories

Number 20: A Time Traveller in Bermondsey

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Boys in Pages Walk - mid 20th century

Our Bermondsey Time Traveller

A time traveller through the ages would observe many changes in the long story of Bermondsey. It is a journey of contrasts. From the rural idyll of *'Well cultivated gardens and wealthy velvet meads... meandering streams, woods and pastures'* of early days, to the squalor of *'Wretched locality...redolent of filth and pregnant with potential diseases'* and today's *'Vibrant area of stylish lofts, bars, restaurants, delicatessens, fashionable museums and galleries'*.

Past Pomp

Bermondsey historian, Edward Clarke, in 1901 wrote *'Who that now walks down Bermondsey Street could form any conception of the scenes which that ancient thoroughfare*

has witnessed, the passage of royal processions, the progress of medieval Knights and Barons on their way to Parliaments that had been held in the abbey, the sumptuous funerals of great personages? ...'



A Royal procession



A Cluniac Monk



Sir John Fastolf

For the four monks who travelled from France to Bermondsey to found the Cluniac Priory of St Saviour (later Bermondsey Abbey) in the 11th century, *'The scene was different indeed to the vine clad terraces of the Loire – a green expanse of meadow and pasture lay before them with cattle grazing and sheep browsing. Tiny streams shaded here and there by willows and alders flowed around.'*

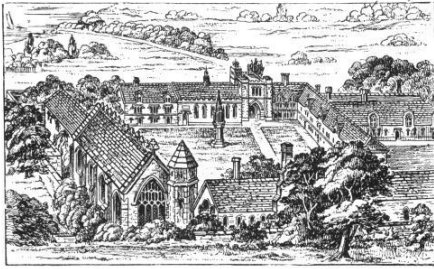
Bermondsey flourished and attracted an eminent resident, Sir John Fastolf (1380-1459). He was a retired soldier with a large house, Fastolf Place, on Tooley Street and various other properties locally. Martha Carlin – historian of Medieval Southwark, wrote *'At least one Southwark estate, that of Sir John Fastolf did have difficulties finding tenants in the mid to late 15th century. Fastolf had built 39 tenements in Bermondsey Street and Horsleydown Lane in the 1440s, which seem to have been money-losers for decades. In 1454-5 about 10% of the rent was lost through vacancies... by 1460 some of the rents had been reduced...but there were still a dozen vacancies'*. (Voids are always a problem for the landlord).

After the Abbey.....

By 1538, the great days of the Abbey were over and our time traveller sees local residents mourn its lost grandeur. *'We can see them, when the monks had disappeared and the last Abbot had ridden away from Bermondsey, gathering to gaze upon the huge dark mass of the monastic buildings, lying in their desolation and abandonment –the dormitories were untenanted, the refectories deserted, the cloisters no longer paced, the Abbot's quarters vacant, the guest house empty, the House of Charity closed. All was now wrapped in darkness... the voice of prayer hushed. The bells hung silent in the tower'.*

The grand mansion which took the Abbey's place retained a rural aspect and attracted aristocratic visitors. In his *'Herbal or General Historie of Plantes'*, John Gerarde – botanist, herbalist and author (1545-1612) noted that *'...bittersweet grows by a ditch-side against the garden wall of the Right Honourable the Earl of Sussex, his house in Bermondsey Street by*

London as you go from the court which is full of trees unto a farmhouse thereunto. And melons are in very great plenty especially if the weather be anything temperate’.



Bermondsey Abbey



Archaeology on the site



Sir Thomas Pope's Mansion

‘The large watercourses are very persistent...first a mere water way, then ditches ‘black ditches’...then sewers covered or uncovered. One of these crossing Bermondsey Street diagonally to Five Foot Lane (Tanner Street) ...the site of Bishop Waynefleete’s stone bridge, which was erected across Bermondsey Street in 1473’.

Community Events

There were many festivities in Bermondsey over the ages, of course, but in the 17th century, our traveller finds that maypole celebrations are causing trouble. *‘The May Day festivities involved drinking and the merrymaking often ended in fighting and general disorder. Exhortations to holiness would be forgotten amidst riot and drunkenness... ears would be offended by oaths and ribaldry’.* Eventually, Edward Elton, zealous Puritan Rector of St Mary Magdalen could take this no longer. *‘He saw no means of preventing a recurrence of such scenes save by the removal of the temptation – the destruction of the Maypole. Elton and his people assaulted the Maypole and did, with hatchets, saws or otherwise, cut down the same, divided it into several pieces and carried it into Elton’s yard.’*(Clarke). The Maypole is now a popular feature of the annual Bermondsey Street Festival.

Our traveller joins the old custom of ‘Beating the Bounds’. On Ascension Day, a party of schoolchildren, clergy and parish officials walked round the parish beating boundary markers with long sticks. In 1868, a description of this Perambulation of the parish of Bermondsey included some scrupulous accounting. *‘Item, 1611 – paid for our dinner on our perambulation day 1616 – paid for beare, bread, cheese, cake and wine... 1692-3 -Two legs of veal, five quarters of lamb, two hundred and a pound of cheese... 1696 – paid for a barrel of beer for processioning, noseгаies and spinnage, salleting and expenses on walking the bounds.....by 1819.... ‘we find with the extra enlivenment of a drum and fife band. The churchwarden and parishioners ...dined later at the Ship Tavern in Long Lane’.*



Beating of the Bounds (Christchurch) 1898

The secret courtship

With appropriate discretion, our time traveller hears of an 18th century secret courtship. William Herbert (1771-1851), distinguished author and librarian of the Guildhall Library, when young worked as an entertainer alongside Sarah Youens, at Bermondsey Spa Gardens. *'...William and Sarah saw a lot of each other ...but their happiness was 'shaken by the hostility of the rest of the Youens family...in Sarah's father, Samuel, William saw a grim and forbidding barrier to his intention to make Sarah his wife. William and Sarah could see no alternative but to get married **without** her father's consent and before the season at Bermondsey was over William had bought the ring in Long Lane...The wedding took place on 14 July 1795 at the church of St John Horsleydown and they went back to Spa Gardens for the evening performance'. When Samuel, Sarah's father, attended a performance at the Gardens and heard Sarah singing a love song to William 'his anger was uncontrollable, the peacefulness of the evening's entertainment was broken by his wild rush to the stage, only thwarted by the restraining hands of other members of the audience'. Thanks to the intervention of Sarah's music master, Samuel was pacified and the lovers re-united.*



Bermondsey Spa Gardens c 1790 – a competitor for the Vauxhall Pleasure Gardens

An eccentric funeral

At around the same time, there was an alarming funeral. Russell Street (now Tanner Street) was named after the eccentric philanthropist and magistrate, Richard Russell who died in 1784. *'After willing various large sums of money to different charities, he desired that £500 be spent on his funeral exclusive of £50 each to six young women ...to be pallbearers and £20 each to four other young women who were to strew flowers before the corpse. Never was a church more indecently profaned, swearing, quarrelling, fighting and picking of pockets appeared to be the principal object...The mob wore their hats, and ...called out to the minister to speak louder. The rector of Bermondsey had his pockets picked...The young women who were to strew the flowers...were under the necessity of throwing their flowers from the pew... into the middle aisle. The remains of Mr Russell...were with the utmost difficulty consigned to the destined vault under the body of the church'.*



Hogarth's picture of 18th century magistrates

Leather, leather everywhere

Now our time traveller is in need of a clothes peg for the in the 19th century, the smell in Bermondsey is terrible. Bermondsey has become a place of artisans and industry – especially in the leather trade. Even in 1625 *'When the Great Plague raged in the City of London, many of the terror-stricken creatures fled to the Bermondsey tan pits and found strong medicinal virtues in the nauseous smell.'*



Leatherworkers currying and shaving skins

Valentine Vox was a ventriloquist by profession and hero of a popular novel published in 1840. He visited Bermondsey in pursuit of an unpaid debt. *'He went down a street which led to the bottom of the Grange Road which appeared to be a spot where the labouring poor of the metropolis had sent their children to play. He had never before beheld such a dense mob of infants. They were running about in legions, shouting, laughing, crying, fighting each other with mud, tumbling into the gutter and scraping the filth off their habillements with oyster shells and sticks. The air appeared to have a scent different from that of any air he ever before inhaled – which he was inclined to attribute to the children, but which was in reality attributable to the tan.'* The tan was the liquid used to process leather.

In 1851, Henry Mayhew, journalist and social reformer, met the 'pure finders' of Bermondsey. Dog's dung was called pure for its cleansing and purifying properties. *'The pure-finders meet with a ready market for all the dogs' dung they are able to collect, at the 30 tanyards, large and small, in Bermondsey where they sell it by the stable-bucket full and get from 8d to 10d, per bucket and sometimes 1s and 1s2d according to its quality...I have found that there cannot be less than 200 to 300 persons constantly engaged in this business.'*

Our time traveller is in good company. Charles Dickens Jr wrote in 1879, *'The great leather, or rather hide, market lies in Weston St.... The neighbourhood in which it stands is devoted entirely to skimmers and tanners, and the air reeks with evil smells. The population is peculiar and it is a sight at 12 o' clock to see the men pouring out from all the works. Their clothes are marked with many stains, their trousers are discoloured by tan; some have apron and gaiters of raw hide; and about them all seems to hang the scent of blood.'*

The writer V.S.Pritchett described his experience of working as an office boy in Bermondsey in the early 20th century *'I liked the Hide Market where groups of old women and children*

hung about the hide men who would occasionally flick off a bit of flesh from the hides: the children like little vultures snatched at these bits and put them in their mothers' bags. We thought the children were going to eat these scraps but in fact it is more likely...they were going to sell them to the glue merchants.....We passed the long road tunnels under the railway tracks, tunnels which are used as vaults and warehouses...There was always fog hanging like sour breath in these tunnels. There was daylight gloom in this district of London. One breathed the heavy, drugging beer smell of hops and there was another smell of boots and dog dung.'

There were some attractive odours to balance things out. As Bermondsey became London's Larder, where imported food was unloaded from cargo ships on the Thames, '*...there was the smell of lavender from Yardleys, vinegar from the pickle factory, fruit from Hartleys and the smell of baking from Peek Freans.*'



Crosse and Blackwell's pickle factory



Kipling St rooftops



Hartley's Jam Factory

Slums

By the end of the 19th century, the time traveller was well aware of the misery of the Bermondsey slums, people living in overcrowded poor houses, breathing bad air, drinking dirty water, suffering poor health and dying young. Life expectancy was 38 years.



Charles Booth's Poverty Map of Bermondsey

Charles Booth's 1889-99 survey of poverty in London noted: '**Melior Place** - Houses on the west side are down. Chapel, soup kitchen etc. East side is two-storey houses with forecourts. **Lamb Alley** - mostly old two-storey houses with attic. The alley leads to **Upper Russell Street**

(Morocco Street) At the west end is 'The Fleece' on the north side, but no dwelling on the south side. The rest of the street has small, old tumbledown houses. A glimpse into a fellmonger's yard showed gruesome piles of sheep's heads ...a woman skinning them.

Vinegar Yard – two new dwellings over stabling on north side. Rowleys Buildings on the south side. Some houses very poor. Some fine blocks of the **Guinness Buildings**. Rooms are let...the maximum wage at which tenants will be accepted is twenty five shillings. On the opposite side **Snow's Fields** present a great contrast, the houses from the east end to Weston Street being for the most part old and tumble-down. There are a few small shops and...Arthur's Mission Hall. Many very poor occupants. **Long Walk & Bermondsey Square** – 'To the east is a very old, wooden break-neck house – a relic of an older style. The whole corner is a bad one with a bad name... A group of women passed... "Going to turn us out of our houses? You'll have to find us some if you do". **Long Lane** – Some shops. A flourishing local tradesman (Fogden) has a house in which servants are kept, but this is exceptional to the street'.

The Autobiography of a Bermondsey Boy written in 1934 by a local man known as F.B. 'Our quarters were not exactly palatial. Two rows of two-roomed 'houses' flanked a courtway paved with flag stones, about ten feet wide'. At the back was a yard quite three feet wide, where reposed the dust pail, impediments, clothes line and lavatory. To enter the house was simplicity itself... one just stepped up, taking care you did not knock your head on the framework. And there you were straightway in the combined reception-drawing-living-scellery-kitchen-and-extra-bedroom'.

Bermondsey At War

The effects of war are all too familiar to our time traveller. Bermondsey suffered under the Blitz and 'flying bombs' of WW2. '7th November 1940 ...the worst happening of the night was the destruction of 25 flats at Guinness buildings, Snowsfields and the blasting of the surrounding property, resulting in a number of hospital cases...The following year 11th May 1941... when daylight penetrated the pall of mist and smoke that lay over Bermondsey, it revealed a sorry sight. Roads were blocked by great masses of debris, craters and miles of tangled hose-pipes; fires were still burning or smouldering all around and nearly all water, gas and electricity services were disrupted. There was yet more in 1944...15th July 1944 - a block of Council flats in the White's Grounds Estate...received a direct hit from a flying bomb...it was largely destroyed while another block was badly damaged. Warehouses in the neighbourhood also suffered badly. Seven persons were killed and 76 others injured. 6th August 1944 ...the flying bomb...resulted in a direct hit ...at Snowsfields...demolishing two blocks of flats...Seventy flats in the nearby Tyers Estate were also blasted. There was a total loss of 50 flats with 14 killed and 52 injured.



Demolition in Bermondsey after WW2 reveals an unexploded bomb

Bermondsey Street

Nonetheless Bermondsey Street is still full of life, it seems to the time traveller, we are on the brink of change. Pre WW2, *'Bermondsey Street has got to be the most important street in Bermondsey. I lived in the middle of it at number 125. Our little stretch of Bermondsey Street had a dairy, a florist, a greengrocer, a printer, a sweet shop, a coal merchant, a café, an accumulator shop, a clothes shop, and two shoe repairers'.*

Post WW2, Peter Marcan, local resident, author and bookseller felt *'Bermondsey Street...is a very muddled street; old and new buildings jostle one and another; warehouses, corner shops, cafes, pubs, a barbers, private residences, businesses of various kinds...People rush away after business hours; by half past six in the evening the street has emptied; it sinks into silence and broods uneasily on all it has seen'.*

Bermondsey renaissance

Arriving in recent times, our time traveller finds that in the shadow of the Shard, *Bermondsey Street is home to independent coffee shops, innovative restaurants and world class art galleries that have transformed the area into one of the world's most desirable post codes.'* (www.the-shard.com)

So the area will continue to thrive in its own way as it has done since its beginnings on the windswept marshlands.



Bermondsey Street Festival