

Bermondsey Street Back Stories

Number 17: Horselydown

By Jennie Howells



1894 The Parish of St John Horselydown

Horselydown – Why the name?

Bermondsey Street, our high street with its lively bars and restaurants is a great destination and has a fascinating history. The ancient area to the north-east known as Horselydown, now divided by Tower Bridge Road also has much to discover. ‘Horselydown’ refers to an area of fertile pastures close to the river Thames, originally grazing for horses. In the 17th century part of the land was used by the Southwark Trained bands (local militia men) for drilling and practice. Their hall, Artillery Hall, was later incorporated in the local workhouse.

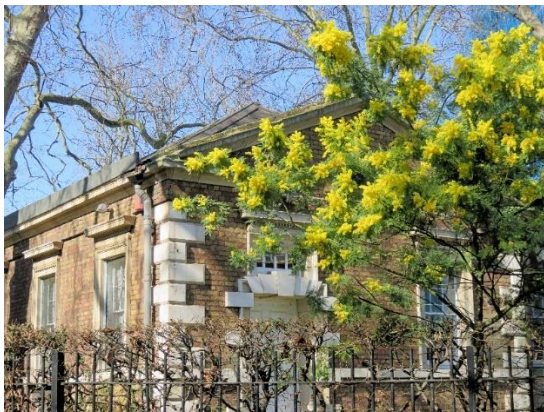
St John’s, a Hawksmoor church

The church was in its own churchyard, now to the north of the railway viaduct which was built 100 years later. The new parish of St John was created from the ancient parish of St Olave. Land for the church and vicarage was bought from St Olave’s school.



St John's Horselydown in its prime

St John's was one of the last of the churches built under the 1711 Commission for the Building of Fifty New Churches. It was designed by Nicholas Hawksmoor and John James and built between 1727-1733. It was notable for its tall, elegant spire and distinctive iron weathervane in the form of a comet. Severe bomb damage to the church in the Blitz left only the north, west and east walls standing, but it continued to serve the parish. A plan for rebuilding in 1956 came to nothing and the parish was merged into St Mary Magdalen. The church was closed and a large number of coffins removed from the crypt to Brookwood Cemetery.



The elegant Vestry Hall

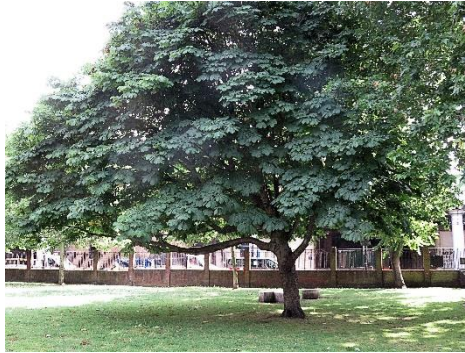


Stone marking the parish boundary

The adjacent vicarage, built in 1734 survived enemy action. The elegant Vestry Hall and Watch House on Fair Street escaped the bombing and was used for baptisms and marriages from 1940. Over the years, repairs and additions have been made to the original 18th century building and it is now in private occupation.

St John's Churchyard

When St John's church was built, its churchyard and that of St Olave's were shared by the two parishes. In 1882 the churchyard was designated a public recreation garden. In WW2 when it was turned over to vegetable production, a major bomb explosion left a large crater. The churchyard was taken over by Bermondsey Borough Council in 1956. The gate pier and railings are Grade II listed and were restored during upgrading of the park, which since 2017 has been under the care of the Potters Fields Management Trust.



St John's churchyard

Sarsons Vinegar/The Maltings

In the early 19th century, Noah Slee established his vinegar works on land between Tanner Street (formerly Russell Street) and Brunswick Court. Well known for the sweet smell of its food processing industries – biscuits, chocolate and jam - Bermondsey also had something a little sharper to offer. The business prospered and expanded and by 1908, it had become Champion & Slee after a merger. In turn, Champion & Slee was acquired by Crosse & Blackwell who already owned Sarsons, a well-established vinegar brand. Champion & Slee joined with other firms to become British Vinegars. Malt vinegar continued to be brewed at the site in Bermondsey under the brand name Sarsons until the works closed in 1992.



Re-purposed vinegar factory buildings at The Maltings

The huge vats used by Sarsons were eventually removed and the familiar acidic smell of vinegar was gone for ever. The buildings were re-developed as residential and office accommodation, preserving many original features of industrial architecture. In 2006 they were opened as 'The Maltings'

Brunswick Court

Brunswick Court, a row of small houses, stood next to the vinegar factory. The sacks of malt in the yard were notorious for attracting cockroaches and other vermin which were a constant trial to the residents. Some of the houses were destroyed in wartime bombing and those

remaining demolished in the late 1980s. They were replaced with similar style modern homes.

London City Mission

The mission operates from an office built on the plinth of St John's church. It was founded by a young Scotsman called David Nasmith who came to London in 1835. He established a team of urban missionaries to spread the knowledge of the Gospel among the inhabitants of London. They were assigned to where the need was greatest.



London City Mission offices

In the early years, the Mission set up Ragged Schools for underprivileged children. They visited homes ravaged by the cholera epidemics which swept through Bermondsey and other deprived areas of London. The Mission gave particular help to the families of working men such as dockers and cab drivers. Introduced to the London Fire Service in 1854, they ministered to firemen and their wives and children at 19 stations. In later years, the Mission was active in helping families made homeless in wartime. It continues to support Londoners today from its offices in the new building designed by J.D.Ainsworth, opened in 1975.



Map showing the line of the Tower Subway (Southwark on the left)

Tower Subway

As London Bridge became increasingly crowded with vehicles and pedestrians, another river crossing was sought. Enterprising engineers found a solution - the Tower Subway. Opened in 1870, it ran from Vine Lane on the south side of the river to Tower Hill on the north side. Approximately 7 ft. in diameter, the tunnel was supported by cast iron segments covering a narrow-gauge railway. Entrance was from small ticket offices at either end of the tunnel and steam powered lifts descended to a waiting area. Cable-hauled wooden carriages carried passengers for a journey of just over a minute.



Illustration of the waiting area of the Tower Subway



The entrance on the north bank

London's first underground railway was a significant achievement, but it was not a commercial success. It was bankrupt within a year. Lifts were replaced with spiral staircases and the tunnel was converted into a footway with a toll of a halfpenny to cross. The dark and rather dank crossing became unpopular after Tower Bridge opened in 1894. The subway was sold to the London Hydraulic Power Company for hydraulic tubes and water mains in 1898. Despite some war damage the structure was robust and it is currently used for water mains and telecommunications cables. A drum-shaped building on Tower Hill, authentically rebuilt in the 1920s marks the original north entrance. The south entrance – now a small, inaccessible utility building - is on Vine Lane.



Fire station building (now Brigade restaurant)

The Fire Station, Tooley Street

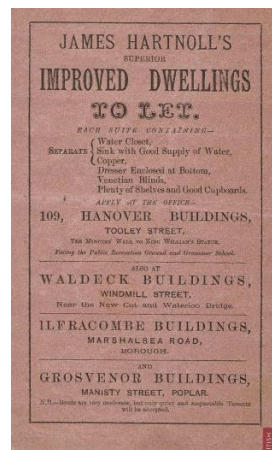
Fire was a constant threat to riverside warehouses and wharves. The great fire of Tooley Street in 1861 lasted 2 weeks. It claimed the life of respected and heroic fire chief James Braidwood and some of his firefighters as it raged through buildings crammed with combustible materials. Braidwood was Superintendent of the London Fire Engines Establishment, forerunner of the Metropolitan Fire Brigade (now London Fire Brigade). He pioneered significant changes to firefighting and identified the need for purpose-built fire stations.

Early stations were plain and functional but the Grade II listed Tooley Street station of 1879 by Alfred Mott is in Gothic Revival style. Fire stations used to accommodate firemen's families and the first, second and third floors were residential. There was also stabling for horses to draw the fire engines. The notable look-out tower was truncated but the station

remained in use until decommissioned in 1928. Later occupants included coffee rooms, a horsehair manufactory, a spice merchant, bankers, garment makers and a garage. Recently, the refurbished building has been occupied by Brigade Bar + Kitchen, a social enterprise offering a restaurant, bar and training opportunities for catering industry apprentices.

Devon Mansions

As the riverside docks and local industries developed, the population of Horselydown increased. There was a need for decent accommodation to replace overcrowded and decaying properties. Hanover Buildings (now Devon Mansions) were built by the early 1880s as social housing or 'model dwellings' by Southwark-born developer and architect James Hartnoll.



Handbill for Hanover Buildings, now Devon Mansions (British Library image)

The flats were created for working people. The name was changed to Devon Mansions in the early 20th century, it is believed in order to avoid association with Germany which was at that time unpopular. There are five 6 storey buildings stretching along Tooley Street, constructed in London yellow stock brick.



Plaque on Devon Mansions

A plaque records the tragic loss of three lives and the repair of bomb damage in WW2. The Mansions were bought by the London Borough of Southwark in 1965 and have been modernised and refurbished in recent years.



Tower Bridge

Tower Bridge Approach

In 1894 Tower Bridge was opened to take some of the pressure of traffic off London Bridge. An approach road was built at the same time joining the new bridge to Tooley Street.

The Tower Bridge Hotel (now the Pommeler's Rest pub)

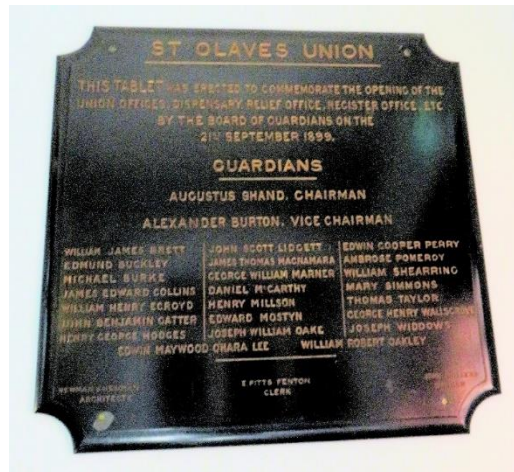
On the north-east corner of the junction of Tower Bridge Road and Tooley Street was the Tower Bridge Hotel which by 1897 had been opened, for commercial clients. The new name celebrates its connection with the centuries-old local leather trade. A pommel can be either the raised part in the front of a leather saddle or the grip at the top of a sword.



The Pommeler's Rest pub

St Olave's Union building, now Millennium Square, Shad Thames

For people fallen on hard times, help was at hand. Under the Poor law Act the parishes of St Olave, St Thomas and St John were combined as the St Olave's Union in 1836. This became the Bermondsey Board of Guardians in 1904. The handsome Jacobean-style building of 1898 was designed for the offices of the Union by a local firm of architects Newman & Newman. It was built by another local man, John Bullers. As well as offices, the Union offered out-relief in the form of monetary and practical assistance and an on-site dispensary and vaccination station. The Union offices are now part of Millennium Square in Shad Thames.



St Olave's Union plaque

London and County Bank (later NatWest Bank)

A busy commercial area needs a reputable bank and this bank was built on the north west of the junction of Tower Bridge Approach and Tooley Street. It was designed in the free classical style by architect William Campbell Jones and constructed of high quality materials. It closed in 2017. It still retains its unusual hexagonal turret.



The bank building



Tower Bridge Road

Tower Bridge Road

With the opening of Tower Bridge in 1894, a new main road was urgently required to take increased traffic. After debate between the authorities and described as 'the work of many years', the Tower Bridge Road was inaugurated in March 1902. Sweeping away small roads, some dwellings, industrial buildings and one section of Hanover Buildings, it cut south from Tower Bridge Approach, across Tanner Street and merged into Bermondsey New Road at Bermondsey Square, providing a direct route to the Old Kent Road. This was a dramatic reconfiguration of the old street with north-south movement now dominating over the old east-west streets. A special metal bridge was required to carry the railway over the wide roadway.

Tower Bridge Magistrates Court and Police Station

With its grand entrance, tympanum and impressive royal coat of arms Tower Bridge Magistrates Court and Police Station presented a formidable appearance. Designed by John Dixon Butler in Edwardian Baroque style and opened in 1905, the building now accommodates the Dixon Hotel. Parts of the original structure including some cells, courtroom and other elements recalling its former use have been incorporated in the interior. Contemporary artwork features less fortunate visitors of the past.



The Magistrates Court (now the Dixon Hotel)

Horses no longer find refuge on Horselydown. The fair thought to have given its name to Fair Street is no longer held, but many clues to the long and busy history of this local area remain.