

Bermondsey Street Back Stories

Number 6: Dobson's Bakery

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The shop as seen from the west side of Bermondsey Street

A lost corner

Stand at the entrance to the park on the corner of Tanner Street and Bermondsey Street, look carefully at the pavement and you will see the faint marks of a historic site. It is the frontage of Dobson's Bakery, the last business to occupy a building that stood here for over 150 years.

Five Foot Lane – Russell Street – Tanner Street

The property was on the corner of Five Foot Lane (later Russell Street and now Tanner Street). It had belonged to Richard Russell, a charitable, but eccentric local gentleman. When he died in 1784, he left considerable sums of money to several worthy institutions,

although accounts of his elaborate and unusual funeral suggest that it descended into disorder and even violence

Mr Dobson – Master Baker and Confectioner

The Bermondsey Street house passed to Sarah Mellick, (née Sarah Russell) and then to the Mellick family. In 1874 a conveyance of the freehold premises at 74 Bermondsey Street (later re-numbered as 111) was made to William Mudie. A series of tenants and owners followed until in 1950, the bakery and shop were purchased by Mr Percy Dobson, a Master Baker and Confectioner. It remained in the possession of the Dobson family until 1970. Mr Dobson's son started work in the bakery in 1950 at the age of 15. His daughter later joined them in the business. Another staff member worked as a night baker throughout the war, retiring just before the bakery closed 30 years later.

Ovens at least 150 years old

The building was scarcely changed and still retained evidence of the 18th century premises. New machinery was installed but coal holes, flour loft and benches all remained. For many years, baking continued in the traditional way in ovens at least 150 years old. The accommodation above the shop had stairs, wooden panelling, fireplaces and other original features.

The smell of baking bread joined other local smells...

Bermondsey Street was full of the sights and smells of industry that came from the tan yards of the leather trade, the pungent aroma from nearby Sarsons Vinegar distillery (Tower Bridge Road) and Hatchers Yard (Bermondsey Street), where Shire horses were stabled. In the freezing winter of 1963, with heavy snow in Bermondsey Street, the thirsty horses had to be watered at a stand pipe erected especially outside the bakery.



An example of a 1950s delivery tricycle

Deliveries by tricycle

The bakery had as many as 900 customers a day. It also supplied the local trades and factories with bread and rolls for their canteens. There were regular evening and weekend deliveries. The bakery delivery tricycle was a familiar sight in Bermondsey Street until the

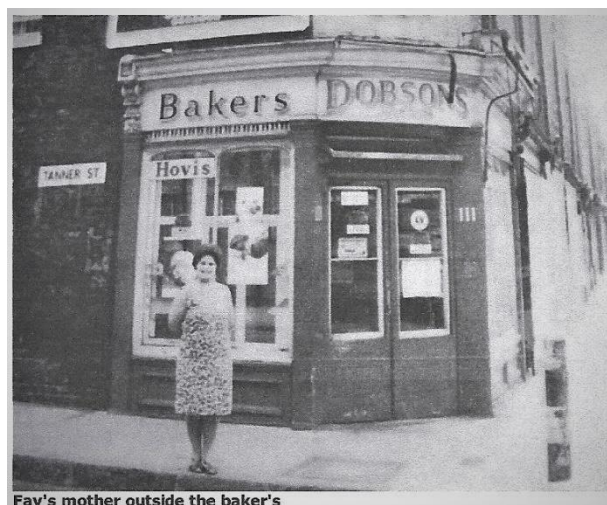
business acquired motor transport in the shape of a yellow, three-wheeled Reliant Robin van.



The trusty fibreglass three-wheeler – a Reliant Robin car

Famous customers

The Rolling Stones were one of the famous groups who used to rehearse at local recording studios, notably in the basement of what is now The Stage building on Bermondsey Street. The members of the band bought sandwiches at Dobsons, returning later for bread to take home.



Fav's mother outside the baker's

Challenges from factory-baked bread

During the 1960s, a new high-energy mixing process shortened the time needed for yeast to rise and paved the way for large-scale bakery factories. Note the prominent Hovis advertisement in the windows in the picture of the shop, a bakery brand still going strong today.

People eating less bread

In 1950, Britons ate 1600g of bread each week on average, but that dropped by a third over the next 20 years due to changing eating habits. Fortunately for bakeries, there was still strong demand for pastry, cake and other products.

From bakery to park

In 1967, the business received a letter from the local authority. It stated their intention to implement a Compulsory Purchase Order in order to extend Tanner Street Park. This affected all the properties from the corner of Tanner Street to the Bermondsey Street park entrance. The bakery doors finally closed on 1st August 1970. It had served the local population since the 19th century and had been the Dobson family home and business for 20 years. The row of houses was demolished. Bermondsey Street lost a piece of its history, but gained a more welcoming entrance to Tanner Street Park.

(With many thanks to Fay Gosbee)