

## Bermondsey Street Back Stories

### Number 8: Where did you get that hat? The story of Christys' in Bermondsey

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April 2020



*Christys' proud marketing material*

#### **Newham's Row becomes the centre of the world of hats**

It was in 1788 that a Quaker called Miller Christy moved the works for his successful business from north of the river to some empty warehouses in Newham's Row, just off Bermondsey Street. By the mid-1800s, his famous tall beaver hats were being produced there, using local materials and imported fur from firms like Martin's at the Alaska factory in Grange Road.



*19<sup>th</sup> century beaver top hat*

### **Hats in all shapes and sizes**

Before long, Christys' was supplying hats for military uniforms, helmets for the police service, three-cornered hats for Chelsea Pensioners, Tudor design hats for Yeoman warders at the Tower of London as well as mortar boards for schools and universities. High quality headgear such as fine silk top hats and bowlers for city gentlemen were in demand.



*World War 2 RAF flying helmet*



*Silk top hats, still worn at Ascot*

Christys' flourished at a time when few left the house hatless and no respectable lady would lunch without one.

### **The Christy & Co Ltd factory**

Reputed to be one of the largest in the world, the Christys' hatworks consisted of an east and a west range of buildings, one on either side of Bermondsey Street. The gateway to the east (Newham's Row) led to a long avenue, bordered with wool warehouses. At the end was a 160ft high chimney, connected to a steam engine. On the other side were a varnish storeroom, a shellac store and workshops for makers of silk, beaver, black glazed or japanned hats.



*The company name on the buildings in Newham's Row until recent redevelopment*

### **Making a hat is a complicated process**

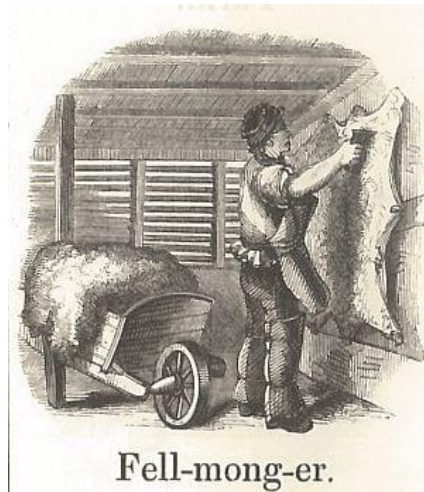
The business of hat-making was complex and involved many different operations. In the east range of buildings were a turners' shop for blocks on which hats were shaped, a carding room, a blowing room (for disentangling fibres of wool) fur and wool washing houses, offices and even a blacksmith. On the western side were a beaver pelt store room, a dye-house, shaping and finishing rooms.



*Female hat worker at Christy's in 1843*

### **Wool from local fellmongers**

Wool was readily available from the woolstaplers and fellmongers of Bermondsey Street. The fellmongers scraped the wool off skins before the skins went for tanning. There was a fellmonger in Morocco Street, at the corner of Lamb Walk until well after World War 2. The wool was brought to the factory in its natural state and treated by soaking and washing.



*Fellmongers scraping a skin*

### **Fur from local fur-pullers**

Fur was obtained from the fur pullers – almost always women – who faced the unpleasant task of tugging it from the skins of animals such as beaver, bear, marten, mink, hare and rabbit. This description, from 1889 is evocative.

*'The work is very unpleasant. The fur-puller sits on a low stool. She has a trough in front of her, into which she drops the down as she pulls it off the rabbit-skins with her knife. Occasionally she stops to rub the knife with whiting, for the skins are greasy. The down gets into her nose and mouth. Her hair and clothes are white with it. She generally suffers from what she calls "breathlessness," for her lungs are filled with the fine down, and she is always more or less choked.'*

### **The development and decline of the business**

The factory was managed by direct descendants of Miller Christy, the founder, for many decades. At its peak, it gave employment to around 500 local workers who were engaged in a multiplicity of tasks.



*A handsome Christys' hat box*

The market for structured quality hats went into decline after 1945. Life became more informal and only on special occasions was a hat required to complete an outfit. Christys' closed their original Gracechurch Street office in 1954 and their Bermondsey factory at around the same time. Their advertising sign in Newham's Row proudly announcing 'Hat, Cap & Helmet' remained on site until recent years. Hats are still sold under the Christys' brand at [www.christys-hats.com](http://www.christys-hats.com)