



Why the carved horse heads on 2A Morocco Street?

By Richard Miller

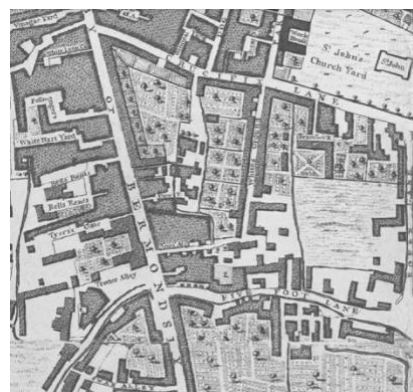
Of the many interesting historic buildings in the Bermondsey Street area, 2A Morocco Street, home of RW Autos for over 40 years, is always a local favourite. People love the two carved wooden horse heads on the frontage and the white tiled brickwork above. The building clearly has some age, but why are the horse heads there? Read on to find out.

Old maps identify this site as a 'smithy' (blacksmith), and the carved horse heads we see today at either end of the business nameboard indicate that the site has also been home to farriers over time. Blacksmiths created many different things, including tools, candlesticks, pots and horseshoes. A farrier was a more specialised blacksmith, focusing on the needs of horses and fitting horseshoes.

We can't be entirely sure about the age of the horse head on the left of the building. A photograph in the archives of Historic England, taken in 1976, shows no head at all. Perhaps the original carving had been taken down earlier in the 1970s, repaired, and re-installed later. Rings used to tie horses whilst shoeing can still be seen at the rear of the building today.

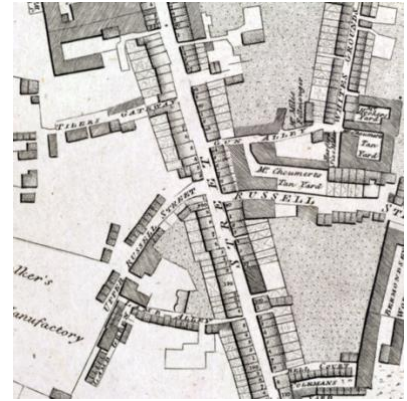


Morocco Street hasn't always existed. An engraving of John Rocque's 1745 map (right) shows Trotter Alley at this junction with Bermondsey Street and a narrow track leading south into a field.





Richard Russell JP, a resident of Bermondsey Street, a woolstapler, art collector and parish commissioner, had great influence in the area. He died in 1784, and by the turn of the century, Five Foot Lane was renamed Russell Street (now Tanner Street), with Upper Russell Street (now Morocco Street) appearing on maps for the first time, as seen on Horwood's map (right) of 1799.



Street numbering in the Bermondsey Street area has changed several times over the years, and this appears to be the case in Upper Russell Street. Thomas Boden, a smith, is listed at No 1 Upper Russell Street in Robson's London Directory of 1832. In the 1841 census, he is found again with his wife Hannah and two children: Herman (20), a veterinary surgeon, and Thomas (17), also a farrier. The 1861 census shows Herman living alone at No 2 Upper Russell Street.

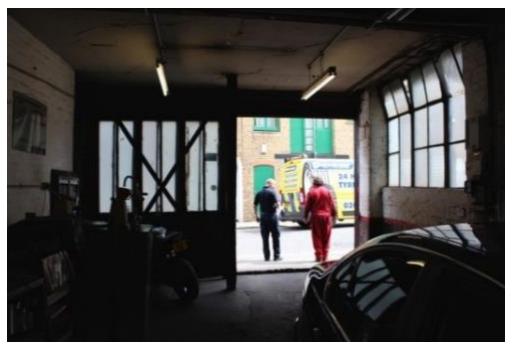


By the 1880s, John Francis Coleman, another veterinary surgeon and farrier, owned the premises. He was a successful businessman with other properties on Newington Causeway and, later, stables in Epsom, where racehorses were cared for.

Street names were to change again by the turn of the 19th century, with Russell Street becoming Tanner Street and Upper Russell Street renamed Morocco Street, both a recognition of the leather trade, which had been one of the dominant industries in the area for 200 years. Morocco leather is particularly fine and often used to make gloves.

Reliance on horses declined throughout the 20th century as motor vehicles became increasingly common, especially after World War 2. By 1957, an insurance map shows the building being used as a cardboard warehouse, although the business name on the building is still The John Coleman Establishment.

But the shift away from transport proved to be temporary, and in the 1980s, RW Autos set up business at 2a Morocco Street. The picture below shows a view looking out from inside the workshop. The continuity is very pleasing, from looking after horses to looking after cars!



Sources: Rocque's Map of 1745, Horwood's Map of London, 1799. Censuses of 1841 & 1861, Kelly's Post Office Directory, Southwark Local Studies Library. Robson's London Directory 1832, 'Horse Ring photo' courtesy of Debra Gosling.