

Pubs, Pints, Porter and Pyes in Bermondsey Street

By Richard Miller



It's thought that the site of the Woolpack, on Bermondsey Street, has been home to a tavern for over 350 years, with the current building dating from Georgian times.

Originally called the Cock and Magpie, or the Cock and Pye, the earliest licensed victualler recorded in the Surrey Land Tax Records was



John Palmer, who paid £12 in 1781 to lease the establishment from Rev. Owen Manning. Palmer retained the licence until 1811, and intriguingly, he was also listed as being a leather dresser during part of his time at the address.



The farthing token (*pictured left*) was struck for the Cock and Pie (*sic*), Barnabie Street (as Bermondsey Street was then known), and coin experts estimate it to be from the 1650s. Tokens emerged as an alternative payment option for goods and services in the 17th century due to the lack of legal coinage in circulation. Great Britain's population had quadrupled, and many businesses in the country, and in London, including several on Bermondsey Street, had their own tokens made during this time. The Royal Mint, playing catch-up, eventually got its act together and began producing copper and silver currency in volume to meet demand for low-value transactions; as a result, the need for tokens diminished.

Another early drinking establishment in Barnabie Street, Christopher's Inn, was important enough to be marked on William Morgan's 1682 map of London, and is even clearer on Roques' Map of 1748 (*pictured right*). David Hughson's *Walks Through London*, published in 1817, reported that 'a very rude emblem, in stucco of St Christopher, adorned the front of the inn'.



On 6 May 1801, the Cock and Pye, the Green Dragon (*pictured right*) and the Plough were included in an auction held at Garroway's Coffee House, Cornhill, London. These pubs, along with other dwellings, businesses, and shops, on four acres of land, either side of Bermondsey Street and in Tyers Gateway, were owned by the Rev. Owen Manning (*pictured left*), who had passed away at the age of 79. Originally from Northampton, he'd lived in Godalming, Surrey, and it was estimated that his Bermondsey estate could be let for £1000 per annum.



Inns commonly provided lodging and food for travellers, along with stabling for their horses, whilst ale and beer houses sold ale, beer and porter. Taverns were more sophisticated than beer houses, typically serving wine, beer and food. Tea and coffee was expensive, and coffee houses tended to be frequented by the more 'well-to-do'. The tankard (*right*) is inscribed 'J Mains/St John's Coffee House/Bermondsey Strt' and was found during the redevelopment of London Bridge Station. It can be seen today with other items on display at the station.

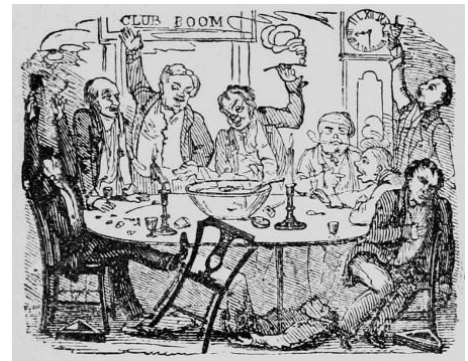


The Beerhouse Act of 1830 liberalised licensing laws, making it easier to open pubs and by 1841, there were no fewer than 21 watering holes in Bermondsey Street. Bermondsey Street was also home to John Gaitskill & Co., who produced one of the most popular gins of the time. Gin, the scourge of the 18th century, began as a medicinal tonic sold by apothecaries to treat various ailments like gout and kidney problems. Its low cost made it very popular but led to widespread social problems and excessive consumption, earning it the name "mother's ruin".

H. Y. HAINES has received instructions to offer to Public Competition, on Monday, Dec. 7, at Garraway's, at 1 precisely, the well-known and justly celebrated **WOOLPACK TAVERN**, BERMONDSEY STREET: the monthly returns are nearly 300l.; held on lease for 40 years, at a mere ground-rent. Full particulars will appear forthwith.—38, Moorgate-street, City.

In 1837, the Cock and Magpie changed its name, becoming the Woolpack Tavern and in 1846, it was offered on a 40-year lease with returns of nearly £300 per month.

The tavern boasted a club room used by 'the gentry' to dine, accessed by the spiral staircase at the front and a second, ordinary staircase from the 'four-ale bar'. During the 1870s, it was home to Bermondsey Chess Club, and on 9th June 1871, a blindfold chess match took place with Mr Blackburne performing the 'extraordinary feat' of playing six of the best chess players without seeing any of the boards. Other clubs and societies also used the Woolpack as a base for regular meetings, including the Bermondsey Brothers Angling Society and the Hand of Fellowship Society of Carpenters and Joiners.



In 1884, the Woolpack hosted six meetings of the Bermondsey Street Improvements Committee, charged with progressing street widening plans at Star Corner and Bermondsey New Road. Bermondsey Street, a main route between Tooley Street and the Old Kent Road, suffered from considerable traffic bottlenecks, damaging local traders' businesses. The committee argued that unoccupied properties were costing the parish £800 a year in lost rates.

One evening, in April 1905, Sidney Perry was found descending the staircase of the upstairs living quarters by Ellen Burns, one of the pub's barmaids. He had stolen three watches, six bracelets, and other articles, as well as £40 in money belonging to the landlord.

Sidney Perry is undergoing a term of three years penal servitude to which he was sentenced last week at the Old Bailey for robbery at the "Woolpack" public-house, Bermondsey Street, when £200 and jewellery was carried off. Martin Snell, a confederate was also sentenced to a term of hard labour.

There were around fifteen people in the pub that night, and Perry and his drinking companion, Martin Snell, were picked out by staff and patrons at identity parades. The case was heard at the Old Bailey, and bar staff reported that Perry and Snell had been in the pub for about four hours in the Private Bar, sitting near the flap, drinking stout, mild, and bitter. Perry went to prison for three years, and Snell was sentenced to hard labour. After judgment, the court revealed that both men had previous convictions.

By the turn of the 19th Century, awareness of the 'evils of alcohol' and pressure from the temperance movement gathered pace. In response, the Licensing Act of 1904 was introduced to reduce the number of pubs in England and Wales. Brewers were compensated for cancellations via a levy on approved licences. Twenty-seven pubs and beer houses in Southwark and Bermondsey had their licenses removed in 1907, including several in Bermondsey Street.



The Fox and Goose (*pictured right*) was one to lose out. The Fox had seen 18 licence transfers in 10 years, and the club room on the first floor was empty and unfurnished. Even the licensee reported that there was no living to be made. Mr Humphreys, acting for the brewers, questioned whether there was any evidence for the authority to suppress the license, saying, *"There was a great deal of through traffic in Bermondsey Street, and a great many factories and warehouses of all sorts nearby. There were also small courts leading to small houses where people who used public houses resided."* The authority declined to renew the licence.

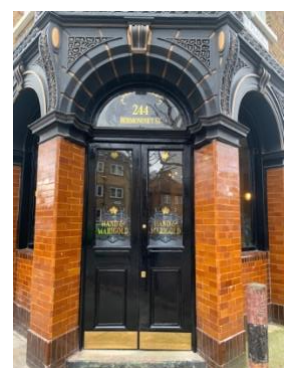


The Grapes at 159 Bermondsey Street was another to lose its licence, described as *'old and dilapidated, and not so good in frontage and upkeep as other [public] houses in the area'*.

The Black Swan, at No 71, one of the oldest establishments in the street, and comprising two rooms, had brought in £145 in food sales in 1906, but was also unsuccessful, along with the Prince of Wales, the Queen's Head and the Eight Bells. The license for the Yorkshire Grey was renewed, and approval granted for improvements estimated to cost between £3000 and £4000.

The Woolpack also continued, and in 1915, a live-in married couple working as a barman and barmaid earned 30 shillings a week. However, the overall number of pubs in the area continued to decline. The Green Dragon closed at the turn of the 1930s, and the King's Arms and Hand, located opposite St Mary Magdalene on Morgan's Map of 1682, closed soon after 1938. By 1950, the Woolpack, the Yorkshire Grey and the Hand and Marigold were the only remaining public houses in Bermondsey Street itself.

This reset did help consolidate the importance of those remaining, and pub culture certainly took a firm hold in Bermondsey during the 20th century. Serving as vital social hubs for local communities that worked long hours in the docks, factories, and the leather industry, pubs provided a place for companionship and conversation. Simon the Tanner, the Horns, the Leathermarket Exchange, the Britannia and the Rose were just some of the remaining pubs that reflected this community in the Bermondsey Street area. A 1972 Thames TV documentary about life in Bermondsey featured patrons in the Hand and Marigold.



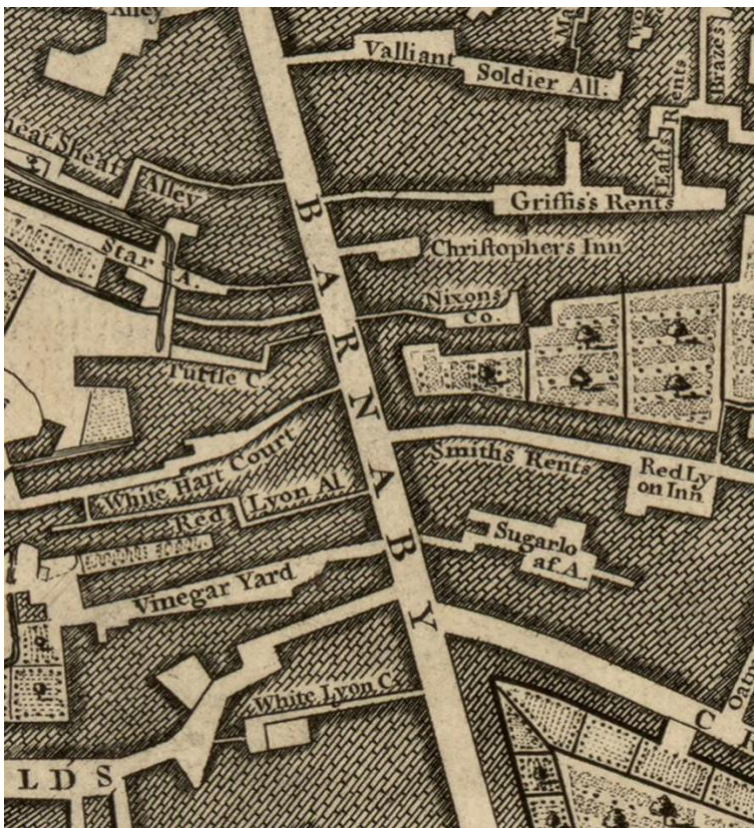
By the end of the 1980s, Bermondsey Street was in a period of 'hibernation', and many buildings were full of antiques, rather than workers. The Woolpack and the Yorkshire Grey remained important for locals, but both struggled into the 1990s. The Woolpack was rebranded as the London Scotia Bar, the Yorkshire Grey became the Honest Cabbage, whilst the Leather Exchange in Leathermarket Street became the Jugglers Arms for a while.



Redevelopment in the 2000s led to a gradual renewal of pubs and bars in the area, and some new establishments, such as Delfina, Village East and the Hide Bar, began to emerge.

The Woolpack and the Rose in Snowsfields were both relaunched, whilst the Honest Cabbage continued its restaurant theme, but as the Garrison Public House.

The Horns in Crucifix Lane was reinvented as Kin & Deum, a Thai restaurant, whilst the Hand and Marigold, which dates back 200 years and closed in 2021, was lovingly refurbished and reopened in 2025.



A final glance at Roque's early 1748 map (*picture left*), which shows inns such as the Wheatsheaf, Christopher's Inn, the White Hart Inn, the Red Lyon Inn, the Sugar Loaf, the White Lyon Inn, the Royal Oak and the King's Arms Inn remind us of the journeys people made to visit Bermondsey, and the changes that have occurred over the centuries.

The Woolpack, the Leather Exchange in Leathermarket Street, the Horseshoe Inn on Melior Street, and Simon the Tanner on Long Lane all survive into the 2020s, helping us maintain a connection to the area's social and industrial past.

Sources: William Morgan's 1682 Map of London, Roques Map of London 1748, Surrey Land Tax Records, Morning Advertiser, 26/11/1846, Southwark Recorder and Bermondsey and Rotherhithe Advertiser, 29/3/1884, Southwark and Bermondsey Recorder 5/8/1905, The Morning Advertiser 2/7/1907, pubwiki.co.uk