



Docked and Parked

JO STOCKHAM



Jo Stockham, Lithograph, 2011.

Can a smell be a monument? Are the enveloping tons of particulates poisoning city dwellers an atomised monument to lack of foresight? When the air is so thick with dust you can taste it, is this a cloud monument parallel to the concrete poured and the rubble pounded? To walk is to be naked to the surfaces of the world, the holes of the body invaded, sound, sight, taste, smell, all without the filter of screen, of glass. An exercise in space-time travel, exposure to the elements, changeability of weather, movements of others. People, animals, goods, channelled by patterns of work, histories of construction and demolition, persisting traces of worlds gone forever or moved out of sight.

To walk is to be intimate with the matter of things, weight of body on foot, pressure of foot on shoe, step of shoe on cobbles, on tarmac, on concrete, on stone kerb, on grass. See traces of a medieval gate post, spaces where words were: P E E K F R E A N S. Bermondsey, once a hub of making: Pottery Street, Weavers Lane, Mill Street, Tanner Street.

Wharfs suffused with rich spices, cinnamon and coriander. Days scented by sugared air: ginger nuts, bourbons, coconut creams: time marked in biscuits. Hartley's chimney spews smells of sweet berry jam, Sarson's vinegar sours days with fermenting malt. The very air tastes of manufacturing. Time marked by rhythms of conveyor belts, die stamps, and trucks. Baking, boxing, brewing, dispatching, a choreography of bodies united in time and motion.



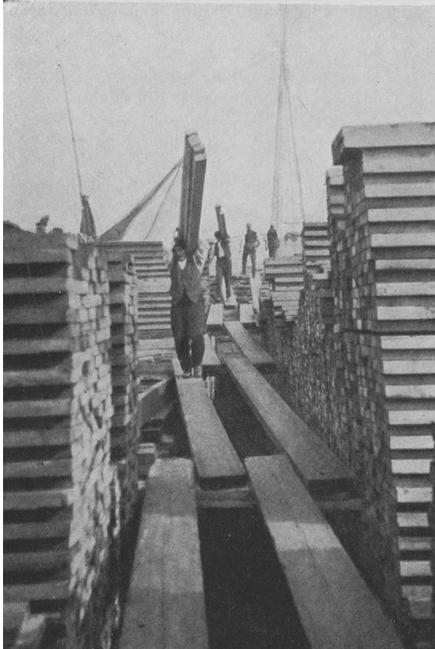
photo credit Jo Stocham

A stone seal marks Alaska Furs, huge wooden drums where urine washed seal skins, turned into hats, sheepskins into RAF flying suits for animal clad fighters. Now luxury living, furs worn perhaps, not made. Trade now is in the brick skins of warehouses, accumulating capital by sitting still, people work elsewhere juggling money not wood, information not skins.

Surrey Quays station; index of regeneration, working landscape leisured, Docks become Quays (1989). Outcry: local history erased, working life hidden, a process of denial? Docks become: retail parks, marinas, a city farm, libraries, leisure centres, a multiplex cinema, wildlife parks and housing. About turn, every work trace becomes a marketing tool (2015): authentic warehouses and

mock dock boutique developments, in warehouse architectural style, co-mingle.

River-time: corner of lower road, cross onto Deal Porters Way, monument to the men who walked planks, juggled battens and boards, shifted and stacked sliced units of tree.



Deal porter Surrey Docks 1933 phot A.G Linney

The steamers bringing softwood from the Baltic or Northern Russia have lately embraced all flags: these vessels arrive with

high stacked deck cargoes and they often have tall thin funnels. In Greenland Dock, in contrast, one sees large, modern steamers with labour saving gear and great, deep holds. Some bring a number of passengers cross the Atlantic. This harbours a different type of vessel from the rest of the Docks in Rotherhithe, for here come the Cunarders, Furness Withys, C.P.R and United States Line Traders, all of a large size.¹

Shiploads of new canned tastes: American peaches, tropical fruits, Canadian salmon, corned beef. Move through Jamaica Road, Quebec Way, Russia Dock, Norway Dock, Canada Dock, an atlas of names, a live streaming of people and goods from all over the globe.

Busy dock becomes flat pond, still wheezing with a tidal swell and drop, grimy water, cold slurry, eddying in manic swirls by jetties and steps. The snake of Thames with its capacity for loads, for work, for communication, winks with disco-boats and tourist cruises, puts on a firework display once a year and drifts, under-employed. Clock on, clock off or stand at the call on shelter, waiting time, waiting to work time. Unproductive once-factories clock up capital, click, click, click, accumulators for future trading, money generators with a river view. What is the time of work or no work, call centre not call on shelter, how does the day get measured? The hinterland fractures, gallons of white emulsion, container loads of plasterboard, patch up dilapidated real estate, held together for future demolition.

Salter Road, after Ada Salter first woman Mayor of Southwark

formed the Beautification Committee (1920). Shrubs and trees in local streets; the Tree of Heaven (*Ailanthus*), a favourite, drops its branches without warning. Legacy: parks, gardens, playgrounds, the open-air lido (1923, closed 1989).

The drab sordidness of old Bermondsey will be gone forever and the district will be illuminated with touches of colour and beauty never known before. We shall have available to all the inhabitants many of the benefits of civilisation previously obtainable only by the favoured classes who could afford to live in the most desirable residential areas.²

Salter Road after Alfred Salter, independent Labour MP, GP, established pioneering health services (1924). Mobile cinema, converted disinfectant van tours the borough plugging into street lamps for power. Huge bugs on screen, a man points to a giant tooth: crown, neck, root, as children look on.³ Kids without sunlight, equals rickets, give them space to swim, to play, send them to Switzerland to sit on a mountain, the GPs they have cared for years. Bermondsey a socialist arcadia of cottages and parks, an inner city - garden city, utopia, here on earth, Quakered.⁴

Ack-Ack, anti aircraft guns in the park, (1939-45) as the docks burn.

Park-time: Pace shifts, draw in lungfuls of leaf breath, time of sap and photosynthesis, clam damp, pine smell. How much grass makes a park? All of us outlived by arboreal, growth, time laid down in rings, bark protected. Varieties of vegetation: girth of plane, of maple, of oak, of swamp cypress. The lungs of London:

trees breath into us, cleaning, filtering, absorbing. Walk in the park to be oxygenated, hydrated, inaugurated into the company of trees.

Early morning lake squall, bobbing things, two swans, six signets, gulls, pigeons, mallards, crows, clamour, caw, flock, squabble, gabble, swoop, waddle, splash. Rowdy bird-crowd. Human mammals move through, skaters skate, joggers jog, scoot, roll, wheel, step, jump, run and walk dogs, energies in furred form.

Weather, whether rain, mist, hail, sun, moonlit frost, breeze, through autumn, winter, spring, summer, the park indexes flux in the shape of stem, structure of trunk, flaccidity of leaf. Cloud, fog, dew, drought, flood, haze, lightning, shower, sleet, smog, snow, in a park, are atmospheres. To walk is to be immersed, drenched in the present condition, amongst the elements.

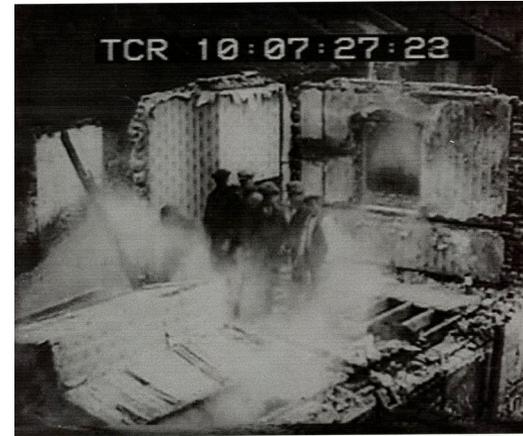


Dilston Grove in 2000 photo Jo Stockham

Park edge; Clare College Mission Church (1883) aims to spiritualise a destitute district. Becomes Dilston Grove, poured ferro-concrete church, first of its kind in the country, replaces original church (1911). Spiritual bunker, Italianate, deconsecrated, artist's studio (1962) then empty for 20 years, rank with dead pigeons and broken windows.

As the 20th century ends, in the cold gloom, on a huge screen, flicker projected traces of people now dead, building for the future present, places for local people to live in. Digitised double from

a Soho editing room, where on a reel to reel deck, seconds of film were copied and coloured, slowed and looped. A line of men push over walls, demolishing slums, rocking and swaying in perfect unison. With ropes and muscle, they topple slabs of brick and disappear into clouds of dust. A celluloid monument performs preserved, fragile document of hopeful propaganda.⁵ Another generation, another re-generation a space transformed (2010): performance space, meeting space, container for the rituals of art.



Still from 'Some Activities of Bermondsey Borough Council'. Dir H.W.Bush 1931

Cross the park towards Rotherhithe, exit at the mouth of a road-tunnel. Brunel Road, Marc and Isambard Kingdom, Thames Tunnel. (1825-1843) 18 years of dug mud, dug for the first time in the world, a tunnel under a river, an under-water monument. Norwegian and Finnish churches, sailors (lost) at sea. Hope

(Sufferance) Wharf, the Watch-house (1821) keeps the grave robbers away. Let's go down the local: The Mayflower, The Ship.

Step off Tooley Street onto Paradise Street, walk along Bermondsey Wall towards Tower Bridge. Butlers Wharf, tea trading area, temporary artist's studios, burnt in a suspected arson attack (1978) forces occupying artists to move on, to make way. Design Museum (1989) Shad Thames, derelict banana ripening warehouse, continues the cultural quarter but now moves west.

The city is choking; try not to breath, the air is making us sick, particulates replace TB. Walk but dodge the main roads, sidle through small parks, appreciating flower boxes, and green walls. Slip past small artisan bakers, coffee roasters, cheese merchants, brewers, inhabiting the railway arches, smells return repackaged. This neighbourhood has upped and come, for whoever can afford to stay. A supermarket on every corner, and estate agents marketing smaller and smaller spaces, bijou, boutique, studio flat. Buildings grow higher and higher, and glass reflects our hurrying selves. Avoiding eye contact, streams of walkers tune in to small electronic receiving devices, heads in the cloud.

Only the river, an ever-changing monument, resists the recalibration of time and space. Watch it, breathe it, walk it, dwarfed by its surges and swells. The water in all bodies pulled and swayed by tides, the small homeostasis of each one of us, sucked and subsumed by hardcore and asphalt, released by the pull of the sea.

ENDNOTES

1 A.G.Linney, *Pocket Guide to the Docks of London*, London: Newton & Company Publishers pp 38-39 (1933)

2 Elizabeth Lebas, The Making of a Socialist Arcadia: Arboriculture and Horticulture in Bermondsey after the First World War in *Garden History*, Vol. 27, No. 2 (Winter, 1999), pp 219-237 contains quote from *Twelve Years of Labour Rule 1922-34*, (1934) London: Labour Institute

3 Information taken from Elizabeth Lebas, (1995) 'When Every Street Becomes a Cinema, The Film Work of Bermondsey Borough Council's Public Health Department 1923-1953' in *History Workshop Journal*, Issue 39 pp 42-66

4 For more information read Fenner Brockway, (1949) *Bermondsey Story the life of Alfred Salter*. George Allen and Unwin, 1949. Republished by Independent Labour Publications 1995.

5 The exhibition *If Not Now When* took place in Dilston Grove, 3rd November - 5th December 1999 a catalogue of the exhibition which explores elements of local history is available from CGP London <http://cgplondon.org>.