

## PORT OF LONDON AUTHORITY

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- IN considering the Port of London and its history one is immediately confronted by an embarrassment of riches; the difficulty is not what to say, but what to leave unsaid. For the Port of London, its growth, its influence on the Nation, and on the very Empire itself is really the story of London's river, which the late John Burns, who had an unbounding love for his city, has described as "liquid history", and it is easy to get carried on this historic stream out of the bounds set by a paper such as this.
- "Father Thames" is well named, for it cannot be disputed that he was responsible for the birth of the City of London. The river dictated the site of the town; it provided a defensive position in the comforting embrace of the Lee and the Fleet; it assured food and drink for the inhabitants, fish abounded within its waters, and corn and coal floated to the City from afar. The health of the community was maintained by the washing away of both refuse and sewage, and it provided an open space that the builders could not violate; it profoundly affected the Roman road plan, and, very much later, the modern rail system; while its long tidal estuary provided miles of safe anchorage, and wharfage beyond need.
- The periodic flooding of the marshland behind the high and wide mediæval banks, reserved, and at the same time suggested the site for the docks of modern times.
- The river was London's inheritance—an inheritance that, with the gradual expansion of world trade, produced larger and larger dividends. For over 1,000 years London has been the Crown of England, latterly of the British Commonwealth of Nations, and it has been the London river which has supplied the gold.
- It is now generally discredited that London existed as a British settlement long before the arrival of the Romans, and another theory, also open to doubt, is that a ford existed about the present site of London Bridge—but from the nature of the banks it is difficult to imagine shallow water there, and, on the contrary, they were ideal for the wooden bridge which the Romans found, and later replaced by a more substantial one, for the roads which served their military stations North and South of the Thames.
- A settlement would naturally soon grow around such a bridge and less than 20 years after the invasion of A.D. 43 Tacitus described London as "an important town and port".
- During the Roman occupation London was the principal port of the Country. The earliest Roman town was East of the Walbrook, roughly on the site of Cannon Street Station, and the harbours consisted of streams like the Walbrook, and inlets in the river bank such as Billingsgate.
- That most of the imports were pottery, large jars of wine and oil, fine cloths and similar goods seems probable, while the more

precious cargoes as well as passengers were landed at the coastal ports which were nearest to Gaul. The most important export was corn, and in the year 359 no less than 800 grain ships sailed from London alone.

The gradual growth of trade necessitated the building of a long wharf on the open river bank as an adjunct to those on the creeks which by then included Fleet river, but even so the ships were too numerous to allow of them all going alongside and London became a barge port in Roman days.

The pulse of progress at times quickened and at times slowed, but from the time London became the capital of the East Saxons, following the dark age which ensued after the Roman evacuation, her forward movement has never definitely stopped for more than a short period.

When the Romans evacuated Britain about the year 410 London seems to have retained her importance for some time. In the middle of the 5th century it was still of some standing, but after that there is a complete blank in the history of the port; but we know that London was the capital of the East Saxons under Aescwin in 527 and then it appears to have been west of Walbrook.

In 597 St. Augustine was sent to Britain by the Pope, and the port soon began to develop a wine trade, probably principally for sacramental purposes and the use of the numerous clerics who were accustomed to it.

The marriage of Ethelbert, King of Kent, with the daughter of the King of the Franks increased trade, and the numerous Frankish coins which have been discovered suggest that it was considerable. In 601 the city was important enough for the Pope to nominate it as a Bishopric; Bede, although writing a century later, says that in 604 London was "the mart of many nations resorting to it by sea and land."

The trade of the port expanded steadily during the 7th and 8th centuries. Practically all the materials for the building of the first St. Paul's Cathedral in 615 must have come by water. The Easterlings, Germans from the Baltic, in the 8th century had a regular trade to Billingsgate and founded a settlement there.

The depredations of the Danish pirates at the beginning of the 9th century began to have a serious effect on the commerce of the port. King Egbert tried to improve the trade between London and France, but with no navy to protect it, trade suffered badly.

The Danish raids began about 834 and in 851 the City was taken. King Alfred captured it in 883 and repaired the Roman defences, and rebuilt it with imported stone, his object being to make it the commercial metropolis of the whole country, but after Alfred's death London suffered another set-back, until with the conversion of Rollo the Viking to Christianity trade flourished again.

By about the middle of the 10th century the drinking of wine became general and the Rouen wine merchants settled themselves on the West side of Dowgate, built a dock there and enjoyed many privileges. As the size of ships increased and creeks silted up,

vessels were moored in the open river and discharged their cargoes into barges. The famous scale of Customs duties issued by Ethelred II in 978 shows the wide variety of London's trade at this time.

The original unity of the Port and the City is recalled by the ancient name of the Sheriff—the Portreeve.

In mediæval times the City was concerned mainly with the preservation of the fishery, and navigation was a secondary consideration. Charters of 1197, 1199 and 1227 enjoyed the removal of all weirs and "to have the punishment thereof to us (the King) belonging". The Lord Mayor was named in a statute of 1393 as the Conservator of the River from Staines to the Medway to enforce earlier statutes in relation to navigation. Not only was the conservation of practically the whole river confirmed to the Citizens, but the water and all rights above and below it and power to improve the banks and shores within the City were granted by a Charter of 1444.

As a result of extensive floods and breaches in the banks and defences a statute of 1488 ordained that the Lord Mayor should have authority in all "issues, breaches and ground overflown as far as the water ebbeth and floweth" and should also control all fishing nets and engines. Orders of the Court of Aldermen for the preservation of the brood and fry of fish, as to the size of nets and for close seasons are numerous (sample herewith). The Lord Mayor licensed jetties and other projections into the river and salmon fishing at such places as Hammersmith and Isleworth even in the 17th century. On occasions he laid claim to royal fish caught in the river.

A long standing dispute between the Lord High Admiral and the Lord Mayor in relation to the conservancy of the Thames as a tidal river was settled in Elizabeth's reign by a judgment in favour of the City and the jurisdiction was confirmed by Charter of James I 1605. "We grant to the Mayor and Commonalty and Citizens and their successors that they may exercise and execute the office of bailiff and conservation of the waters of the Thames by the Mayor or his sufficient deputies, from the bridge of Staines to Yenleet and Medway, and upon the banks, shores and wharfs of the same water, and to collect the fees and profits of the same bailiff to the use of the Mayor, commonalty and citizens".

Charles I in 1638 confirmed the right of the Citizens to all fines, forfeitures and penalties imposed by the Mayor in Courts of Conservancy. The Lord Mayor, assisted by the Recorder, held eight Courts of Conservancy in each year, two for each of the Counties of Middlesex, Surrey, Kent and Essex and occasionally a Court in London. These Courts were held in exactly the same form as Sessions of the Peace, and a jury was summoned for each County to present nuisances and defaults. Photostat copy of sessions of Conservancy held by Lord Mayor for Middlesex, 14th Sept., 1715.

The expense of holding Courts of Conservancy was considerable and were rarely covered by the fines inflicted. The Lord Mayor usually distributed small sums in Charity to the poor, church bells were rung and the items, Tobacco, Sugar, oranges and pipes always appear (vide accounts of 1672).

Besides holding Courts of Conservancy the Lord Mayor conducted in state an annual view of his jurisdiction from the Western Boundary at Staines to the Eastern Boundary stones at Upnor and off Canvey Island. The Navigation Barge was provided for such inspections. The last barge the "Maria Wood" was built in 1816 at a cost of £5,281 and was sold in 1859 to Alderman Humphrey. The Lord Mayor's state barge, of which there is a model in the entrance to Guildhall library, cost £2,579 in 1807 and was sold in 1860. The Lord Mayor has often been called "Admiral of the Port of London" probably by reason of his jurisdiction as Conservator but he has never held any Courts of Admiralty.

In modern times he has been received aboard H.M. Ships of War on ceremonial occasions with the honours due to an Admiral.

The chartered powers of the Corporation were greatly extended by a long series of Acts of Parliament by which tolls, tonnage and Port dues were granted to the Corporation for the maintenance and improvement of the river and port.

These extensive statutory powers for controlling and improving navigation were exercised by a Corporation through a Navigation Committee appointed by the Common Council with the assistance of Harbour Masters, Water Bailiffs, Collectors of Tolls, Lock-keepers and numerous other officers. The Minutes of the Committee were transferred to the Thames Conservancy Board following the Act of 1857.

A long dispute as to the title of the Corporation to the soil and bed of the Thames was settled in 1856 following a suit instituted by the Attorney General on behalf of the Queen. The suit was discontinued upon terms that the Corporation withdrew all claim to the bed and soil and paid £5,000 into the Bank of England to the Credit of the Commissioners of Woods and Forests. Thereupon the estate and title of the Queen by right of her Crown was conveyed to the Corporation upon trust to pay one-third of the profits of the estate to the Queen as part of her hereditary possessions. The Corporation enjoyed no benefit from this agreement as the Thames Conservancy Act of 1857 transferred all the power, authorities, rights and privileges both of the Crown and the Corporation to the new Conservators.

Any consideration of the Port through the ages without reference to the docks system is Hamlet without the Prince.

Very briefly, then the position of the Port was such that towards the end of the 18th century conditions on the river were chaotic.

Robbery and pilferage was rife, indeed to such an extent had it grown that in 1797 the year's "disappearances" were put at about £500,000, while the West India Merchants wrote off 12 months loss at £150,000.

In 1795 a general meeting of West India Merchants accepted both plans and estimate for a dock and filled a subscription list for £800,000 in a few hours; the West India Dock Act was passed in 1799 and in 1800 a licence was obtained and the work commenced. Apparently the only people not pleased with the project, apart from

those who had reaped a rich harvest from the robberies and pilferage mentioned above, were the Wharfingers and Lightermen, who felt their livelihoods to be in jeopardy.

The former were appeased by a cash payment and the latter by being given the run of the dock water free.

This charter of "the free water clause" still holds in all docks.

The creation of the dock was seen to be a very successful undertaking, and similar powers were obtained for a "London Dock" and the London Dock Act was passed in 1800. This was followed by the East India Dock Act in 1803, and the Commercial Dock Act of 1810 while St. Katherine's Dock was completed in 1828.

By about the middle of the last century the docks were turning from lucrative enterprises into forlorn liabilities, due perhaps partly to Free Trade and the Free water clause, as if goods had no longer to be kept under King's lock they could go to the Wharfingers whose charges (unburdened by the ponderous capital outlay of the companies) were cheaper, while the lightermen rejoicing in the Free water clause entered the docks and came away with cargoes which would otherwise have been revenue for the companies.

But the major cause of the distressed state of the docks was the cutting of the rates to uneconomic levels in the process of competition between the Companies.

In the 80's the London Dock Co. plunged with the great new "Albert Dock" while the East and West India Docks, long since amalgamated, countered with Tilbury.

The rate cutting was continued and finally application was made to levy a toll on barges. When the Bill to tax barges reached the House the Government decided to subject the Port to a Royal Commission. The finding of the Commission was that the Port was in danger of forfeiting its age-long supremacy. The river had been neglected, the docks needed re-equipment and the estuary had too many rulers. One over-riding Authority was recommended to take control.

The debates and discussions lasted for six years, and then the President of the Board of Trade transferred the Dock Companies with all their complications to a public authority, and in 1908 the £23,000,000 bargain was ratified and the Port of London Authority was born.

It leaves the thought that it was a misfortune that the administration of the City, the River and the Port should have been severed, and one can only conjecture what might have been had the Corporation built and managed municipal docks and administered the whole commercial waterside—a natural development of its market rights, but like the incorporation of the suburbs, such an expansion was beyond the vision of the citizens of those times.