My Family, the Docks and Canning Town

By W Read

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Preface

Whilst researching my family history it became apparent to me that the docks of East London figured prominently in the lives of many of my family members. They gave my family work and I knew of some of the problems that had affected my family when they were closed, also, as a child I had heard many stories centred around the docks. For these reasons I decided to look a little closer at how the docks came into being, and why they closed, and a little more about the history of the area around the Royal Docks where I lived as a child. It wasn't meant to be an exhaustive write up, but as I did a little research, I realised that it also led to other factors connected with my upbringing, like the houses we lived in, my schooling and so on. I have therefore included some notes on these items, especially where they relate to my childhood memories.

I hope that, as a whole, it will give my descendants an insight into this part of their family history.

Bill Read

Acknowledgements

I feel I must acknowledge the sources of my material, so I would like to say thank you to the persons and publications listed in my bibliography and also the London Borough of Newham Archives at Stratford Library, where I obtained some of the photographs I have used. Also of course, a grateful thank you to family members who gave me further information.

My Family, the Docks and Canning Town

A brief history of the area in which I was born, the development of the docks, and the role it played in the lives of my family.

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Photographs, Illustrations and Maps

Chapter 1

My Family and the Docks

Whilst researching my family history I have found reference to several ancestors in different parts of my family as either being dock workers, working at trades associated with the docks or the goods being shipped through them, or living in areas adjacent to the docks.

William Read, my two-times great-grandfather, is recorded in the Census of Poplar in 1861 working as an iron plate driller, presumably in the shipyards. Whereas members of the Bruns side of my family are in Whitechapel and are enumerated as sugar bakers. I suspect processing the raw sugar being imported through the docks; a process that seems to have been undertaken a lot by German immigrants, which both the Blanking and Bruns members of my family were. There are other family shown as shipwrights, and in later years are documented as labourers and stevedores.

I do not know of many of my family working in the docks prior to the 1860s and those I do know of are in Middlesex near the India Docks. As the docks grew, and particularly with the opening of the first 'Royal' Dock in 1855, several people, including some members of both the Read and Bruns family, moved across the Iron Bridge into Canning Town and the areas around the Royal Docks, (see Appendix 3; map of the docklands), no doubt attracted by the prospect of work in the new town. Many did obtain employment, for a lucky few it was of a permanent nature, such as Patrick Dalton my great-grandfather listed as a labourer in 1901. For others it was much more difficult, as work was on a casual basis.

It was common to find sons following their fathers into this work. My own father, William Joseph James Read, worked as a dock labourer for a while, his entry having been facilitated by my grandfather Joseph who was already working in, what I am told, was a position of some influence. My grandfather's father and grandfather also worked in the docks. Of my mother's family, I know that her great-grandfather was associated with docks and I have dockers' work cards, for her grandfather, Alfred Bruns, father Ernest and her brother William (Bill). I also know from talking to some of my mother's brothers that they too had worked in the docks. Therefore, at least four generations from both sides of my family where dock workers, giving an association going back some 130 years.

The nature of the work was harsh for all, but for the casual workers it was very hit and miss. The numbers of ships arriving at the docks varied greatly from day-to-day, so the number of workers needed fluctuated, with men being called upon day and night for anything from a few hours to a full days work. Usually the dockworkers were hired by what was known as the 'call on' system. This involved the men standing around at the docks waiting to be picked for work. This took place twice a day and the men had to be present to stand a chance of obtaining work.

This process, which was definitely experienced by some of my family, existed up until 1967 when the unions finally managed to get it abolished. Although in early times anyone could get casual labouring work, in later days, workers required a dockers card. The system is illustrated in Photograph 1 which shows a crowd of workers holding up their cards, and in Photograph 2 which is a more recent scene.

1 Dockworkers holding up their cards at 'call on'

2 The 'call on' shed, No. 8 Victoria Dock 1962

A 'call on' is described well by Union leader Ben Tillett talking of a 'call on' in 1887.

"A foreman or contractor walks up and down with the air of a dealer in a cattle market, picking and choosing from a crowd of men, who, in their eagerness to obtain employment, trample each other under foot and like beasts they fight for the chance of a days work."

For casual labourers, in the early days, this system meant that many were uncertain of work and existed below the breadline, with poverty rife. The great dock strike of 1889 changed many things; a negotiated settlement included a pay rise, a minimum four hour shift for casual work and the abolition of piecework. However, conditions were never wonderful; the work was tiring and dirty and could be extremely dangerous. Asbestos, phosphates, lead, cement and many other substances, formed a constant chemical hazard. Work-related diseases were common, especially infections, bronchitis and lung disease from handling these and similar cargoes such as very dusty products like tea or tobacco. Another contributory factor was probably the lack of sanitation provided.

Accidents were also frequent, as evidenced when my grandfather Ernest Bruns was badly injured by a fall into a ships hold in about 1944, which resulted in him having to give up work early. In fact physical accidents were commonplace, with many men losing a finger or damaging limbs. Back injuries were accepted as the norm due to the constant lifting of heavy loads.

It is also true that not all accidents were genuine. I know from conversation with my grandfather and grandmother that some accidents were faked, using 'reliable' witnesses – a slipping load perhaps; maybe a fall; or an inexplicable back injury! The purpose was to either give a man time off with pay, or to obtain a payout for the injury, maybe both. The witnesses profited as well, with the 'injured man' making payments to those who corroborated his injury. Whatever the scam was, I was told of it being referred to as a 'greenacre', but there is a difference of opinion as to whether this was the term for a genuine accident or claim, or a scam as outlined.

I must admit to having recollection of an incident where a man approached my gran in 1981, (which was around the time of the closure of the docks when the last vessel was loaded in the King George V), some years after my granddad's death, and he gave her a sum of money for help my granddad had given him with a 'claim', which may or may not have been genuine, and which had taken some years to come to fruition!

I asked my mother about these scams; she says that her memory is that they were known as 'greenacres'. Whether right or not, one thing is for sure, that it was only due to the strength of the Unions around this time and the rights to improved conditions for workers, that claims of this nature were possible at all.

Mind you, not all accidents resulted in tragedy either. Following up on a memory of a story told to me by my grandmother, regarding my grandfather Joe Read and his role in putting out an accidental fire on a munitions ship during the war (and so saving a large section of the docks from severe damage), I discovered that a part of this story was true when amongst papers my brother had, belonging to my gran, there was a letter of commendation to my grandfather in June 1951 from Royal Mail Lines Ltd., awarding him £10.00 in recognition of his "timely and meritorious services" in putting out a fire on the 'LORIGA' (which was moored in the Victoria Docks and was carrying a highly flammable cargo of nitrates), "averting what might otherwise have been serious consequences".

As a child, and in fact until quite recently, probably I, like many others, only saw ‘dockers’ as a term describing men busy in the loading or unloading of ships, or perhaps occasionally working on the machinery associated with their work. I made many visits to the docks as a child and this may account for my perception. However, it was much more than this, with dock workers comprising of many tradesmen, such as blacksmiths, sailmakers, lightermen and porters, to name but a few, all being described as dockworkers. I took the word ‘docker’ to mean a labourer as I describe above, but recently realised that the term could mean anything from a casual labourer to a more highly skilled person who would earn much higher wages, such as the stevedore. The stevedore is particularly relevant to me in relation to several family members. In my granddad Joe Read’s Army papers I found he had been trained as a stevedore during his service years. Mind you, even though he qualified, it appears from record that his behaviour wasn’t always up to scratch. Stevedore is also given as the occupation of both my mother’s father Ernest, and her grandfather Alfred, as detailed in papers I have relating to the family.

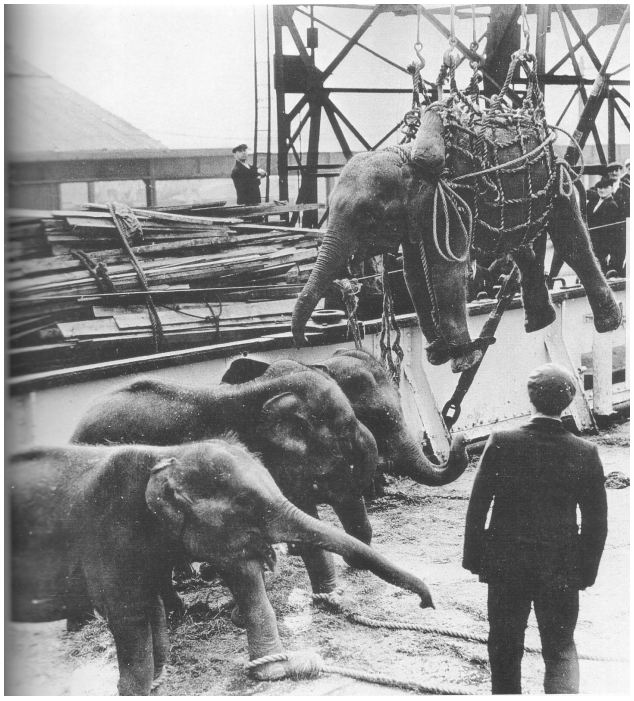
Stevedores it seems were a cut above the general docker. Specialist skills were needed to load a ship correctly, requiring knowledge of where to place the cargo correctly for unloading at the end of a voyage, and how to distribute the load so that the ship was safely balanced, so preventing possible capsize. Stevedores were usually hired in gangs, working under a master stevedore.

I know the closure of the docks affected my family adversely; it created unemployment and changed their whole way of life. It also had a dramatic effect on the area and of the people with whom I grew up. As a child I had, as stated above (though many times illegally, as us kids were fine about climbing fences), been in the docks and seen the hustle and bustle of the work and now suddenly it was very quite, and remained so for some time after closure. I wandered around vast empty areas, of which only a small part was in use and being rented out to small business. Of course this has now changed again, with vast redevelopment having changed the area and once more it thrives.

What will always remain though are elements of the docks like the impounded water, the giant cranes and a host of other things that remind us that these docks were once the largest dock complex in the world.

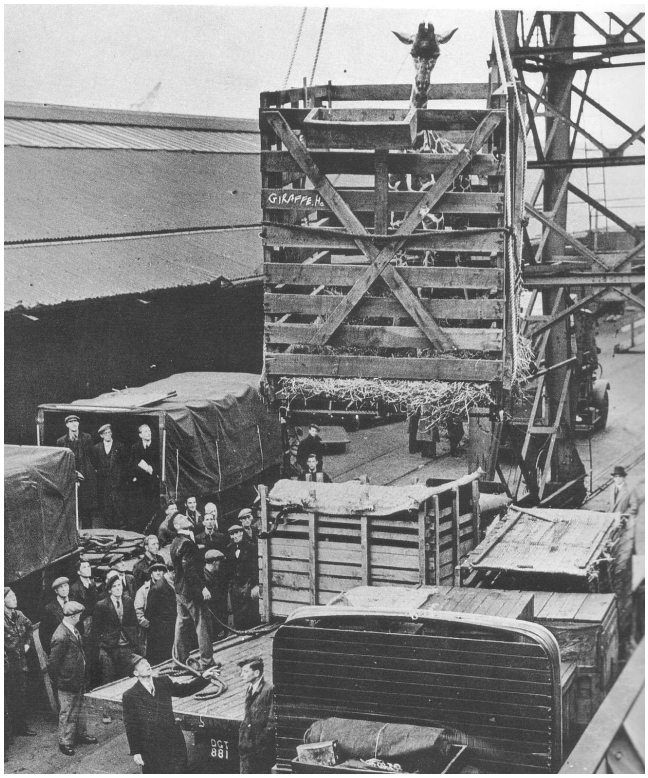
3 Albert Dock quayside, a busy scene in the late 1950s

4 Aerial view of the King George V and Albert Docks 1949



5 Elephants being shipped at the King George V Dock about 1947

Exotic cargoes included animals, and I remember being told of the elephants as a child.

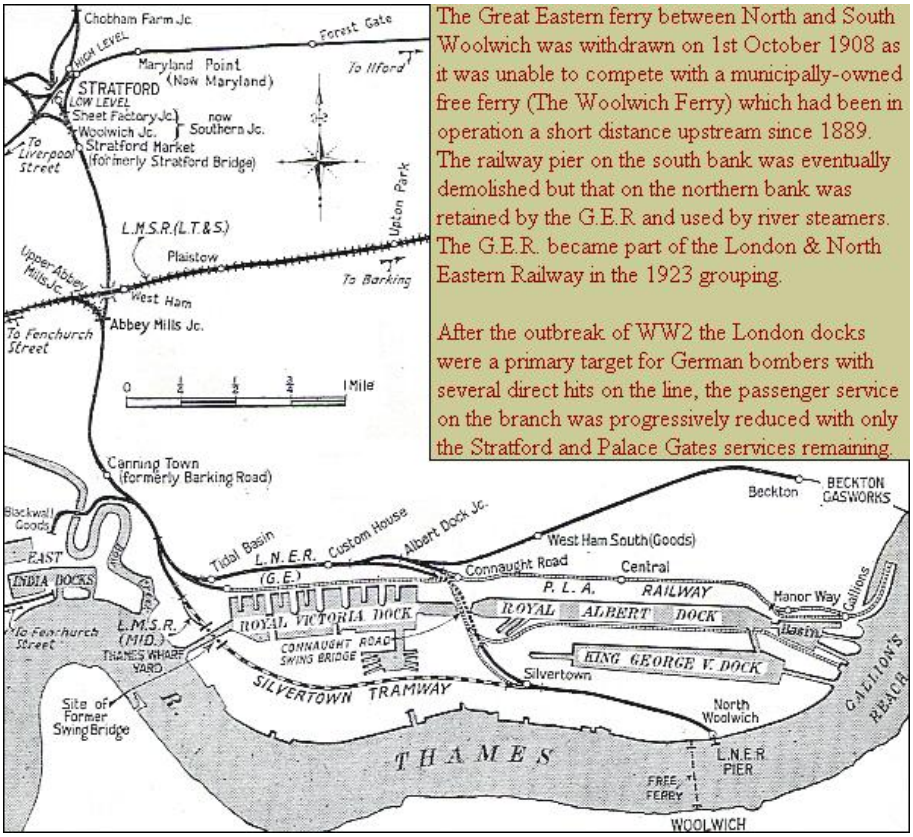


6 Giraffes in transit at the London Docks about 1946

The Woolwich Free Ferry

With the increase in trade came an increase in the need for transport, and a means of crossing the river Thames. The Great Eastern had run a ferry service, which was withdrawn from service in 1908 as it was unable to compete with the Woolwich free ferry. Woolwich also had a foot tunnel which crossed under the river, and a railway line which served both passengers and the docks.

7 Foot tunnel entrance at Woolwich



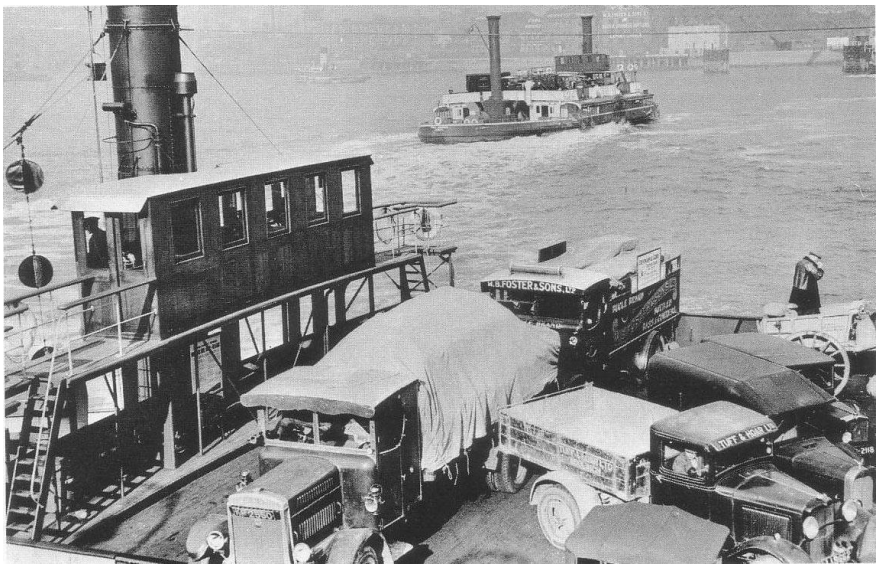
The Great Eastern ferry between North and South Woolwich was withdrawn on 1st October 1908 as it was unable to compete with a municipally-owned free ferry (The Woolwich Ferry) which had been in operation a short distance upstream since 1889. The railway pier on the south bank was eventually demolished but that on the northern bank was retained by the G.E.R and used by river steamers. The G.E.R. became part of the London & North Eastern Railway in the 1923 grouping.

After the outbreak of WW2 the London docks were a primary target for German bombers with several direct hits on the line, the passenger service on the branch was progressively reduced with only the Stratford and Palace Gates services remaining.

8 Plan of the Woolwich railway line and the Royal Docks

9 Silvertown Railway Station 1965

10 Woolwich Railway Station



11 Woolwich free ferry about 1930

The ferry provided a valuable service, allowing goods to be moved across the river to and from the docks. I only just remember the Paddle Ferries as they were put out of service in 1963. As a child I used to be taken for a ride on them as a treat. The four ferries up until 1963 were the Squires, the Gordon, the John Benn and the Will Crooks. I once spent a whole afternoon with my brother Jeremy on one of the new ferries after an argument with our father, which resulted in us running out of the house without shoes or coats, unfortunately it was raining, so we went to the ferry where we knew we would be warm and able to dry out.

12 A scene from the docks

13 The Dominion Monarch

Shown in dry dock in 1959, the Dominion Monarch towers over Saville Road in Silvertown, close to where several family members were born. I remember similar scenes from my own childhood.

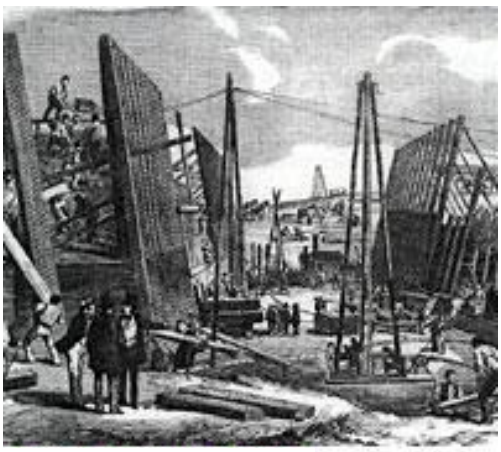
Chapter 2

The Docks, their Development and Decline

Historically, the earliest dockyards were naval, with the earliest being recorded in the 15th century. Always associated with the import of goods, there was a big increase in the shipping trade from the 18th century. All over England large commercial ports began to develop from the trade generated by the shipping companies importing and exporting ever greater quantities of goods. This was accompanied and dramatically increased by the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, with England manufacturing and exporting an ever increasing range of goods. To facilitate this increase the West India Dock Company built, and opened in 1799 the first commercial dock, the 'West India'. This was very successful and the London and East India Docks soon followed (1806). They were specifically designed to allow ships to unload by the warehouses, whereas previously the goods were unloaded onto smaller boats first (these being operated by watermen or lightermen).

It wasn't long before the docks could not cope with the increased trade and began to seem too small. The British Empire was expanding rapidly, with even greater quantities of exotic goods being imported into Britain. In addition to the need for increased capacity, there was a need for larger lock entrances capable of allowing access for the large ocean-going steamships and passenger liners, which were making many of the smaller locks redundant.

To try and help the situation new docks were planned downstream. These were the Royal Docks, and the need for capacity, coupled with a fear of losing trade to the East and West India Dock Company, is what prompted the London and St Katherine's Dock Company to build the Royal Docks. The first of which, the Victoria opened in 1855, followed in 1880 by the Albert and finally by the King George V in 1921. Together, these docks formed the largest area of impounded water in the world, and were the docks I came to know as I grew up in Canning Town.



14 The Royal Victoria Dock under construction

Until the 1930s London was the greatest port in the world, with its seven docks covering a water area of 720 acres, giving about 35 miles of quayside. Over 1000 ships arrived or departed each week.

The port was vast, each part requiring thousands of workers from many different trades. The London Docks at Wapping were described by Thomas Burke in 1919 as, "*a treasure house, a little town by itself and every job that men can do has its shop here*". He went on to describe many of the varied trades and workshops necessary to the running of the docks. Among those described were the turners shop, the wheelwright, and the chain maker. A list of other dock trades is given at Appendix 2.

When looking for our dockland ancestors it must be kept in mind that though many were labourers, others were highly skilled. Earlier I mentioned one specialist, the stevedore. This is one job that I know members of my family carried out in the docks. Other specialists included 'deal' porters, who handled large stacks of wood, a particularly dangerous job involving working at heights of up to 60ft, often in wet and slippery conditions. There was also the lighterman, (a name taken from 'lightening the ships'), also known as waterman. They had to serve a seven-year apprenticeship and records of them exist dating back to 1629.

Decline

Whilst successful, the docks employed these tradesmen and thousands of other workers. Some of the early docks experienced financial troubles, mainly due to overprovision of services, which led to the East and West India Docks Company going into receivership in 1886. A royal commission was appointed to look at these problems, ultimately leading to the creation of the Port of London Authority (PLA) in 1908.

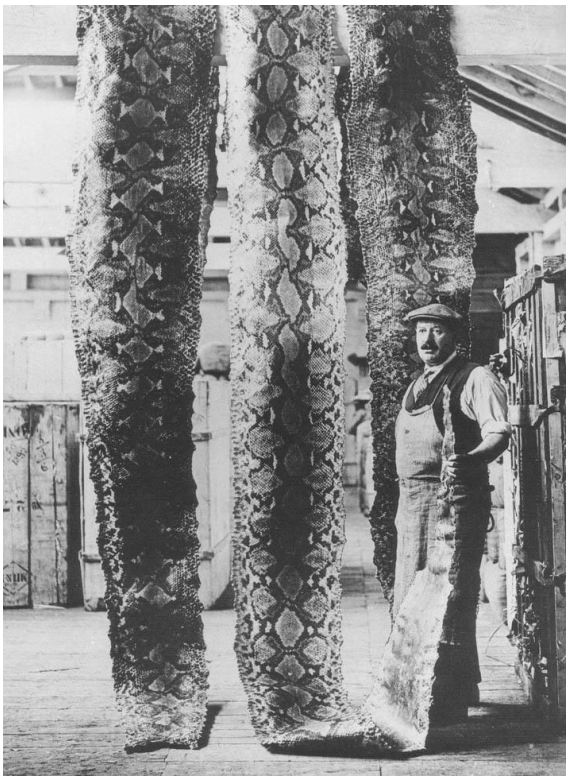
Under the PLA much modernisation was carried out, including larger docks able to take 30,000 ton ships. In the period 1910−1950 the docks were reasonably prosperous. This reached a peak in the 1950−1960s, after which many problems centred around technological change, containerisation and a change in trade movements following Britain joining the EEC. This led to a rapid decline and by 1978 the upper docks, and especially the Royals, brought the PLA near to insolvency. There were some radical moves to try and correct the situation, and it was suggested they close the upstream docks, instead they moved PLA cargo handling away from the Royal Docks to Millwall, West India and Tilbury Docks.

Now decline was well set in, and more docks were soon to close. A chronology of the closure of the docks is as follows.

The East India Docks closed in 1967, soon followed in 1968 by the London Docks. In 1969 St Katherine's closed and 1970 saw the Surrey Docks close. In 1980 West India and Millwall Docks closed, and finally, in 1981 the Royal Docks closed, the days of the working docks were numbered. In the same year the London Docklands Development Corporation (LDDC) was formed and through regeneration projects, including housing and small business schemes, they have, to some degree, revitalised the area.

Photographs 15−18 illustrate some of the varied and exotic items shipped through the docks in their heyday.

15 Cars being exported in the 1930s



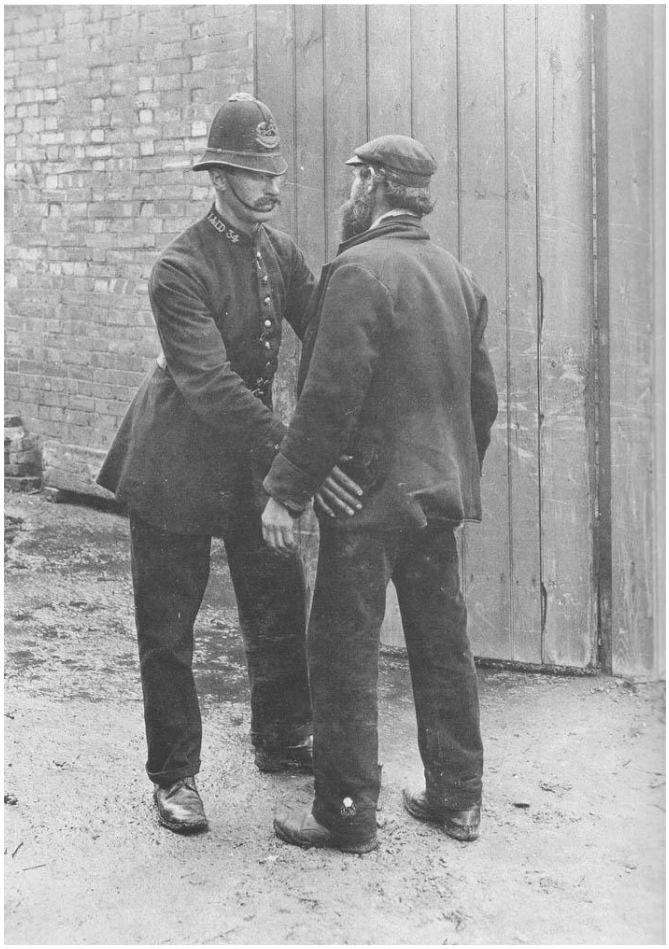
16 Python skins

Python skins were up to 20ft long; 3½ times the height of the man shown − several shoes and handbags for the ‘dedicated follower of fashion’!

17 A mountain of tea

18 Ivory being weighed

On a final note, though crime was always a problem in the docks, theft wasn't a major contributory reason for the financial problems, and in fact had its lighter side, as evidenced in one record, when a limping worker was searched and found to have a frozen leg of mutton down his trouser leg!



19 A docker being 'rubbed down'.

Rubbed down was local terminology for being searched.

Chapter 3

A Short History of Plaistow Marshes and Canning Town

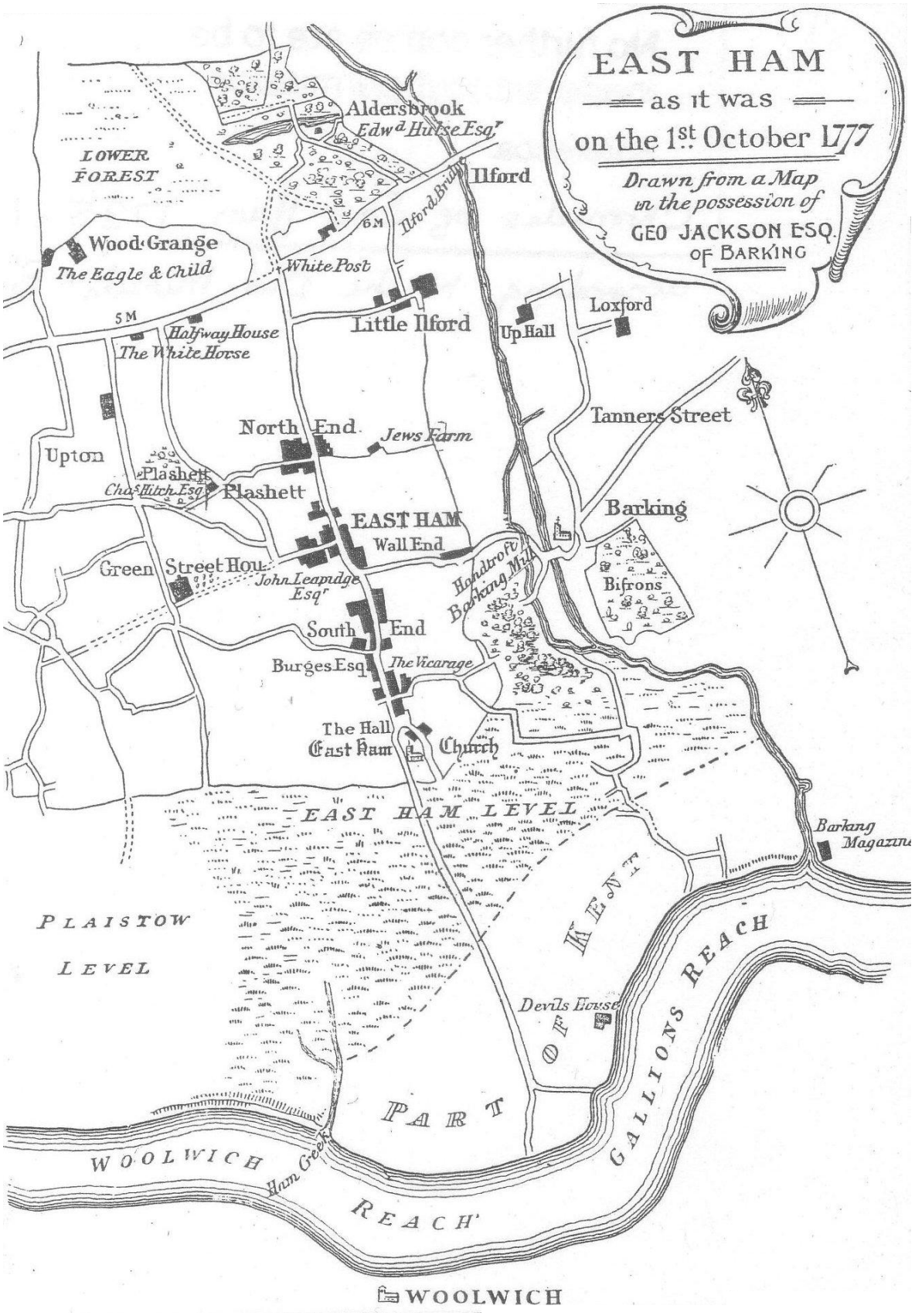
The area of marshy fenland which comprises Canning Town, Hallsville, Silvertown, and extends down through North Woolwich was known as Plaistow Marshes, it ran on into East Ham and Barking Creek in the East.

During various building works carried out in the area, including the excavation of the docks, evidence has been found of occupation since the Bronze or Iron Age periods. Coins and Roman remains have also been discovered.

Prior to 1700, little is known of the history of this area, but what is known is it went by the name of Hamme (an area of flat low-lying pasture), and was owned by Guthram the Dane, who apparently won it in battle with Alfred the Great in 878 AD. By 1086 it comprised of three manors, namely East Hamme, West Hamme, and Little Ilford, plus a small area by North Woolwich which was owned by Westminster Abbey. By the mid 1800s there was just one house in the area between Bow and Barking creek, known as 'Devils House', and only one road, which ran from East Ham to the River Thames (see illustration 20).

However, this was soon to change. In 1844 the Metropolitan Building Act prohibited 'harmful trades' being carried out within the confines of London. A certain George P Bidder presumably had the foresight to see this would affect the area of Plaistow Marshes, and by 1847 had completed his railway, known as 'Bidders Folly', which ran from Stratford, through what is now Canning Town and Silvertown, down to North Woolwich, mainly through open marshland. He had also bought most of the land between Bow Creek and Gallions Reach, naming the area Lands End.

The Metropolitan Building Act soon led to a demand for land for factories outside the main area of London, and where better to site potentially dangerous businesses than in a convenient area just outside of the prohibited zone, with good river access − Plaistow Marshes.



20 Map of East Ham 1777

In his article 'Londoners over the Boarder, Household Words Vol 4 1857', Charles Dickens gives an account of the area of Canning Town and Hallsville, outlining how the two towns came into existence. Hallsville first because of the need for housing for workers at C J Mare's shipbuilding yard at Orchard Place, founded about 1847 (which by 1857 was half empty due to bankruptcy of the firm), and then Canning Town, which was newly formed by the creation of the Victoria Docks and the subsequent need for housing.

Dickens paints a very grim picture of the place, where high tide is 7ft above ground level and protection is only afforded by an embankment attributed to have been built by the Saxons, Danes or Romans. However, on one visit he remarks that "*in the dry green scene there is a feeling of repose, happy homes of men who pasture flocks and herds, safe from the wear and worry of the world*". This illusion is soon dispelled as the area, being cut off from the protection afforded by the Metropolitan Building Act, is free to build streets of new houses, "*without drains, roads, gas or pavement*". He said that "*if a Londoner were to visit by taking a ride on a train out of Fenchurch Street, if he should go in wet weather, or winter for that purpose, he will doubt if it be land he has come to see. It is a district, at such times, most safely explored on stilts*"

The article condemns the area completely, two years prior to his report it seems there wasn't even a good water supply laid on. The following paragraphs taken from Dickens' report are indicative of how bad things were.

"*Canning Town is the child of the Victoria Docks. The condition of this place and of its neighbour prevents the steadier class of mechanics from residing in it. They go from their work to Stratford or to Plaistow. Many select such a dwelling place because they are already debased below the point of enmity to filth; poorer labourers live there, because they cannot afford to farther, and there become debased. The dock Company is surely, to a very great extent, answerable for the condition of the town they are creating. Not a few of the homes in it are built by poor and ignorant men who have saved a few hundred pounds and are deluded by the prospect of a fatally cheap building investment. But who was it that named one row of houses Montesquieu Place? We should like to see in Canning Town some of the Engineering works suggested by a place where on one spot you may pass out of Arkwright Street into Brunell Street and turn your back upon Graves Terrace. Was it then an undertaker who had made his money in these parts, and spent it in a profitable investment upon houses that would further freshen up his trade, who built Graves Terrace in Canning Town?*"

Dickens also had some things to say about sanitation;

"*Not to be unjust to the district, let us own that we found one ditch behind a row of houses covered with green matter, thus proving that it was not poisonous to organic life to the last degree. In one there was an agitation which suggested that its course was open, and we found this to be really the one ditch which has, at certain hours, a flow. It has tidal communication with the river Lea. We understood that a few of the best houses, five or six perhaps, are drained into this ditch, when it is at some distance from their windows, and thus have what is, in those parts, to be considered decent drainage.*"

It seems George P Bidder had not been such a fool after all, his land was needed for the influx of trades, new factories, the new docks, and of course the housing for the workers, as so well described by Charles Dickens.

Among the early arrivals had been C J Mare's Shipbuilding, then Silvers waterproof clothing works, (later renamed the India Rubber, Gutta Percha, and Telephone Cable Works), also Henry Tate and Abraham Lyle. All of these businesses, and many others in the area, have played a role in the livelihood of members of my family, and I have documents showing their places of employment.

In 1870 the Beckton Gas Light and Coke Co. was founded, it was the largest gas works in Europe and certainly didn't help the local pollution levels. In fact a great deal of the industry which took up residence here was highly polluting and decidedly dangerous. Many of the chemicals and materials used in manufacture led to disease and poor health. From a danger point of view one good example is that of 19 Jan 1917, when the Brunner Mond works, which had been given over to the manufacture of munitions for the war effort, exploded 50 tons of TNT causing the biggest explosion ever to occur in London and damaging 7000 buildings and killing 73 people. It was heard as far away as Norwich, but caused slightly more of a problem for members of the Sexton and Dalton parts of my family, who lived almost on top of the works.

On the housing front, various attempts were made to try and improve the conditions outlined by Charles Dickens. In 1875, the completion of the London Metropolitan sewage works led to the yet another 'largest in Europe', with the establishment of the Beckton sewage works, which finally led to an improvement of sanitation in the area.

In the period between the wars, movements by both the government and individuals like James Keir Hardie and Will Thorne, led to schemes to clear the slums and develop better, healthier living conditions. New houses were built, some with open plan garden schemes. New services were provided, including clinics and nurseries, schooling was improved and the Beckton Lido was opened (a great favourite of mine when I was younger). Roads were also improved and the effects of pollution from industry were looked at. Plans were made for more open housing and a lower population, also to try and lower pollution to an acceptable level by transferring some of the industry to other areas.

From my own memories, not all of this was a resounding success. I remember from my childhood that in the early 1960s there were still many streets of houses which could definitely be described as slums. Damage from the Second World War was evident everywhere, with *debris being our playground a lot of the time. Mind you, I enjoyed my schooldays, which until I was 11 (when I passed the dreaded 11 plus and got to go to South West Ham Technical college, see Photograph 21), were spent at Star Lane Infants and Primary school (see Photographs 22 to 24). I have many good memories of the school and enjoyed my time there, even if I wasn't the most well behaved pupil they had. To this day I still have contact with two of my teachers, Derek and Ann Hull, and many of my classmates (Photograph 25), so in this area, at least for me, improvements to the facilities of Canning Town proved positive.

**debris were a piece of land left from bombed out houses after demolition and clearance.*

Until I was six years old my parents lived with my father's parents at No. 39 Ling Road. I have read of this style of housing (where you have one family upstairs and another down, each with their own front door) being described as one of the better built types of house (see Photograph 26 when I was a child and Photograph 27 taken recently after some 'works' had been carried out). It consisted of two largish rooms, two smaller rooms, plus a 6ft square box-room (my bedroom for many years then and also a bit later), a scullery and an outside loo approached by very steep back stairs. At times, five adults plus two children lived there, with just one sink and cold running water. There was no hot water, no central heating, no bathroom, like many, I used the old standby tin bath shown in Photograph 28. My grandmother died Christmas 2005, after living in this house much the same as it was when she first moved in, the facilities, or lack of, being those described and a gas fire for warmth. The house has now been modernised, but certainly did well to survive as a relic, reminding us of the past, for so long.

When I was six years old my parents got their own place. We moved to No. 190 Malmesbury Road (Photograph 29), a street in which many members of my mother's family lived. This house was of the type which my grandparents' house replaced, being much earlier in design, and eventually pulled down as part of the slum clearance. There was a communal front door which was used by both the family living upstairs and the family downstairs. There was a small outside yard and a communal loo, complete with wooden seat, which to access one had to go through the downstairs family's passageway to a rear alleyway. We had two bedrooms, which at one point was shared by four of us children and my parents. It had a very small living room and a tiny scullery. Again, the only facility was a cold tap. No bathroom for us, but by this time I had progressed to a weekly visit to the local baths, though it seemed that some of my contemporaries (gleaned from recent reunion discussions), were rather privileged, and did have a bathroom. For heating we had one coal fire that we lit in the living room (actually each room had a fireplace, but the bedroom fireplaces were closed off). We couldn't afford to run more than one anyway, and I remember that in winter we had ice form on the inside of the bedroom windows, and even the end of my nose sometimes!

We lived at No. 190 Malmesbury Road until I was nearly 15, though I did still spend a lot of my time with my grandparents at No. 39 Ling Road. At first I stayed there most weekends, as did my brother Jerry, later they kept a room for me as I was always falling out with my father. In 1972 we moved to No. 8 Kennedy Cox House (Photograph 30), a block of Maisonettes which still exist on the Newham Way, by Canning Town flyover. This is where I met my ex-wife, who today still lives at her family home at No 9 Kennedy Cox House. This home was the first we lived at that had a bathroom. Later still we moved to No. 8 Clifford Road (Photograph 31), a newly built four bedroom house, that not only had a bathroom, but central heating as well.

Malmesbury Road and the adjoining streets were eventually pulled down as part of the slum clearance in that area. With redevelopment many new houses were built on the site around Malmesbury Road, and they actually left open green areas, along the lines of the proposed improvements outlined earlier.

I finally left East London in 1986 and I still have family living there, but nowadays when I visit the area it seems to have lost something of the identity it had for me. Perhaps that is my perception from childhood, but I really don't remember Malmesbury Road being that bad a place to live. In fact I often find myself thinking about Canning Town and the people who lived there, it will always invoke special memories for me.

Canning Town is well summed up in the following paragraphs, written by Thomas Burke after a visit he made there in the 1920s.

"*Canning Town is good East End. Its pulse and temper are deep and wayward. It drums barbarically to the rhythms of Alsatia. Here is a whiff of old untamed London, a whiff of Tudor Bankside, and though like all East End Parishes it has it's missions and settlements, it hasn't yet surrendered to them. Respectability has pricked it, but hasn't wholly blasted it.*

The people seem to be of their surroundings, of scrap iron and abandoned workings; they have got so far with a struggle, but no further! Despite their poverty and disadvantage, their in-between world of seaman's hostels and boarding houses, the people of Canning Town and Silvertown possessed the dignity, pride and resilience common to all of London's Dockland communities."

21 South West Ham Technical School

22 Star Lane Infants and Primary School

My classroom was on the 1st floor, at the front, just above the pillar box.

23 Star Lane Primary's playground

24 Star Lane class photograph about 1967

My classmates and our teacher Mr Hull (guess which one is me?)

25 Class reunion 2004

I am on the sofa to the right, Derek Hull standing to the left, and Ann Hull sitting on the sofa arm beside me.

26 Me outside No. 39 Ling Road about 1962

27 No. 39 Ling Road 2006 (new brown wood door)

28 Joe and Mary Read, my grandparents, at No. 39 Ling Road
(Proof of my tin bath!)

29 No. 190 Malmesbury Road

30 Kennedy Cox House

The right-hand inset is a view of the front door of No. 8, which is the furthest ground floor maisonette of the block.

31 No. 8 Clifford Road

Bibliography

Chris Elmer and Alex Werner; Dockland Life, a pictorial history of London's Docks 1860-2000.

Your Family Tree Magazine July 2007; Dockworkers (Stevedores, Lightermen and Labourers).

Port of London Authority (PLA) website; Docklands History.

Charles Dickens; Londoners over the Border, Household words, Vol 4, September 12 1857.

Thomas Burke; quotes as extracted from Dockland Life.

Online websites of London's docklands and its history, including the Museum in Docklands.

Appendices

1 My Ancestors Associated with the Docks.

2 Trades Associated with the Docks.

3 Modern Maps of the Docklands.

4 Letter of Commendation (received by my grandfather Joe Read).

My Ancestors Associated with the Docks

This list is of family that I know who worked in occupations associated with the docks. Where possible, I have listed the work they did and the source of my information.

READ

William Joseph James Read, my father, worked for a short while as a labourer.
Joseph Read, my grandfather, a labourer, but was also trained as a stevedore and listed in his army records.
David Henry Read, my great-grandfather, listed as a dock labourer on his children's birth certificates.
William Read, my great-great-grandfather, was, according to an early census a driller and William Read, his son, a boilermaker (also from an early census).

BRUNS

Ernest W Bruns, my maternal grandfather, a labourer and stevedore. I have dockworker cards and information provided by living family members.
Alfred Bruns, my great-grandfather; I have copies of his dockworker's cards.
William, John and Michael Bruns, three of my mother's brothers. Michael (Mick) was pensioned out from injury. I know all personally and have discussed aspects of the docks with them.

DAY

John Day, my great-grandfather on my mother's side of the family; listed as a labourer on family birth certificates.
George Day, John's father; listed on a birth certificate and in the 1901 census.

DALTON

Patrick Reynolds Dalton, my great-great-grandfather, he was the grandfather of my grandmother Mary Read, who told me that he was listed in the 1901 census as a dock labourer.

FINN

William Finn, great-grandfather of my grandfather Joe Read; he is listed in the 1861 census as dock labourer.

CHAPMAN

Edward Chapman, my mother's great-great-grandfather, on her father's maternal side; listed as a dockworker in an early census.

Trades Associated with the Docks

This list is only an example of the trades associated with the docks.

Trade	Type of work carried out
Blacksmith	Manufactured ships fittings, nails and metal items.
Boilermaker	Manufactured and repaired steamship boilers.
Carpenter	Built and repaired wooden ships and fittings.
Crane driver	Loaded and unloaded goods.
Deal porter	Stacked large piles of wood stock.
Divers	Inspected ships hulls and carried out repairs.
Driller	Believed to have worked alongside the riveters drilling the holes and other duties.
Fitter	Worked on engines and other machinery.
French polisher	Polished wooden fittings.
Grain porter	Responsible for bagging grain.
Hauler	Carried goods.
Iron caulker	Prepared ships plates for welding.
Joiner	Made ships furniture.
Labourer	General 'dogsbody' for the heavy work − the worst job being on the sugar details.
Painters	Painted the ships and other general painting work.
Pilots	Navigated and moved ships.
Porter	Carried goods.
Rigger	Fitted ships out with ropes and rigging.
Riveter	Riveted the steel ship plates into position.
Sailmaker	Responsible for the ships sails.
Sheerhulker	Replaced wooden ships' masts.
Stevedore	Responsible for the safe loading of the ships.
Storeman	Issued and responsible for the dockyard workers' supplies.
Tally clerks	Recorded goods.
Timber rafters	Organised floating wood stocks.
Warehouseman	Organise and stored goods.
Waterman or lighterman	Operated the small boats, used amongst other things, for loading or unloading ships and ferries.
Welder	Welded hulls and other fittings.
Wharfinger	Owner of, or worker on, a wharf.
Winchdriver	Trained operative of steam driven winches.
Wine-taster	Graded imported wines.

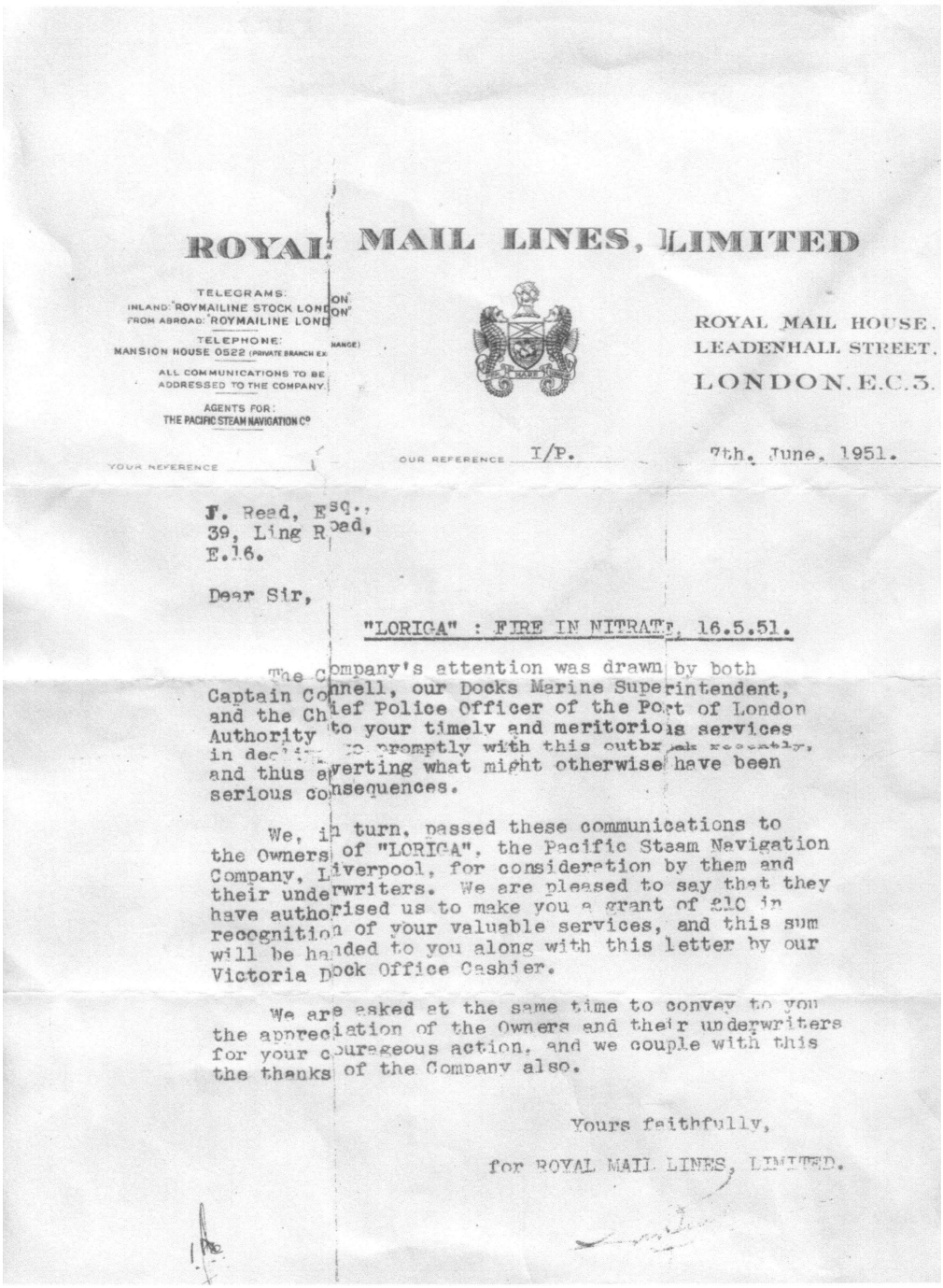
Modern Maps of the Docklands

32 West India and Millwall Docks

33 The Royal Docks

Letter of Commendation

This letter was sent to my grandfather, Joseph Read, for putting out a fire on a ship and averting considerable damage to the docks. Note the amount of the award for saving potentially tens of thousands of pounds worth of damage!



ROYAL MAIL LINES, LIMITED

TELEGRAMS:
INLAND: ROYMAILINE STOCK LOND ON
FROM ABROAD: ROYMAILINE LOND ON
TELEPHONE:
MANSION HOUSE 0522 (PRIVATE BRANCH EX HANGE)
ALL COMMUNICATIONS TO BE ADDRESSED TO THE COMPANY.
AGENTS FOR:
THE PACIFIC STEAM NAVIGATION Co

ROYAL MAIL HOUSE,
LEADENHALL STREET,
LONDON, E.C.3.

YOUR REFERENCE

OUR REFERENCE I/P. 7th. June, 1951.

J. Read, Esq.,
39, Ling Road,
E.16.

Dear Sir,

"LORICA" : FIRE IN NITRATE, 16.5.51.

The Company's attention was drawn by both Captain Connell, our Docks Marine Superintendent, and the Chief Police Officer of the Port of London Authority to your timely and meritorious services in dealing promptly with this outbreak reported, and thus averting what might otherwise have been serious consequences.

We, in turn, passed these communications to the Owners of "LORICA", the Pacific Steam Navigation Company, Liverpool, for consideration by them and their underwriters. We are pleased to say that they have authorised us to make you a grant of £10 in recognition of your valuable services, and this sum will be handed to you along with this letter by our Victoria Dock Office Cashier.

We are asked at the same time to convey to you the appreciation of the Owners and their underwriters for your courageous action, and we couple with this the thanks of the Company also.

Yours faithfully,

for ROYAL MAIL LINES, LIMITED.