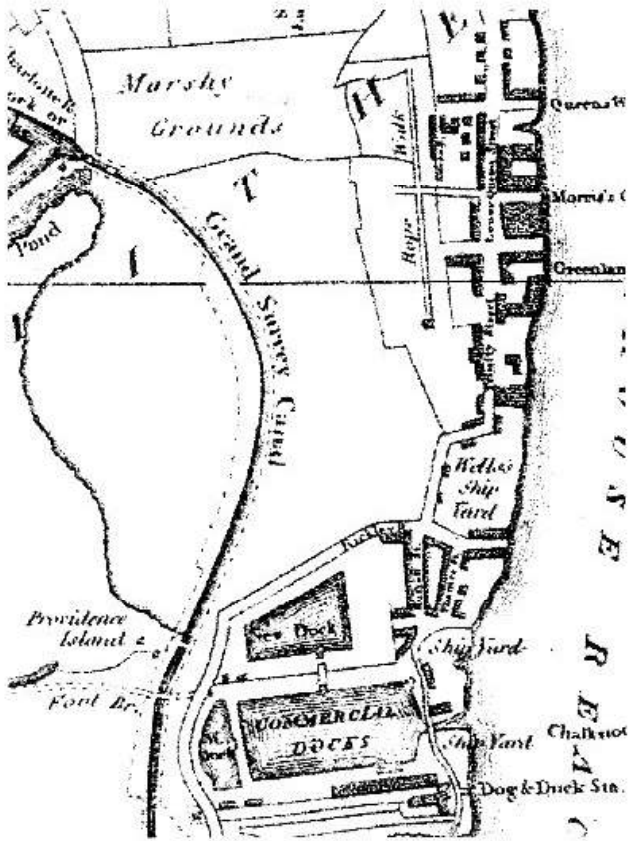


HISTORICAL NOTICE
OF THE
COMMERCIAL DOCKS,
IN THE
PARISH OF ROTHERHITHE, COUNTY OF SURREY
BY
NATHANIEL GOULD

1844

ROTHERHITHE LOCAL HISTORY PAPER NO. 5

The Commercial Docks, as surveyed in 1809, from Laurie & Whittle's map of London, published in 1811. It seems to be accurate so far as the docks are concerned, but the Wells brothers had vacated their shipyard almost a decade earlier.

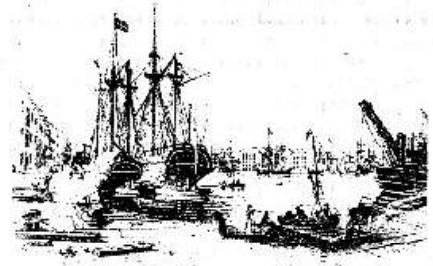


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NEW EDITION, WITH ADDITIONAL
ILLUSTRATIONS AND AN INTRODUCTION

BY
STUART RANKIN

1998

INTRODUCTION

This little booklet was one of two published during the 1840's - the other being Rev. Edward Blick's *A Short Account of the Churches, Schools and Charities in the Parish of St. Mary Rotherhithe* - which throw valuable light on social and economic conditions in the area at a period of rising prosperity and growth.

The docks were taking over from the shipyards as the main local employers, and through rate payments they were also the main source of municipal income for paving, street lighting and poor relief. The *Historical Notice of the Commercial Docks* should be read with this background in mind. Over and above their legally enforced rate payments, the Commercial Dock Company, and some of its officials and their families, supported a local church, schools and charities with voluntary contributions of land and money (see page 18). A former auditor of the Company acted as joint Treasurer of the Rotherhithe Savings Bank (no doubt somewhat ornamentally, but it was indicative of commitment). By 1844, the Commercial Docks were much more than just an employer, but were an integral part of the local community. The Grand Surrey Canal Company, which shared the bulk of the interior of Rotherhithe peninsula with the Commercial Dock Co. seems to have been more impoverished - at least in the period covered by Blick's book. The Grand Surrey Canal Co. also operated docks which competed in the timber trade with the Commercial Co., and this probably explains why the map issued with the original publication has the sole reference in the entire work to this rival undertaking. Furthermore, this map ignores the formation of the Grand Surrey Inner Dock (see map inside back cover) implying that it was still no more than the canal which its promoters had intended.

This is not the only respect in which Gould is less than candid. Shipbuilder William Ritchie, who bought the Greenland Dock Estate from the Wells brothers, then sold it shortly after to the newly formed Commercial Docks Co., is something of an enigma. I have never found details of any ship which he constructed - he certainly never built any for the Royal Navy or for the East India trade, and must have been in a fairly small way of business; not the kind of entrepreneur to have the capital available for property deals of that size. It seems likely that he was used to buy the Greenland Estate, pending the formation of the Commercial Docks Co. and the application for an Act of Parliament. The chairman of the new Company, Sir Charles Price, was in the happy position of owning a bank, so might well have been the source of the necessary funds. Somewhat oddly, William Ritchie never became a director of the Company, but he was one of the first auditors.

Ritchie may have been involved in a similar manoeuvre in 1815, when he briefly took over the former Dudman's Dockyard at Grove St. Deptford, in what seems to have been an attempt to "squeeze" the rival East Country Dock Company, which had been hoping to expand.

Little is known of Gould himself; all that can be said is that he was probably involved in the timber trade, he became a Director of the Company in 1830, and had an obvious pride in the undertaking which he was helping to run. His account of events during his directorship can probably be relied upon, but his description of the early days of Howland/Greenland Dock prior to 1807, seems to have been derived from the writings of various antiquarians, and is wrong in a number of respects. However, the *Account... of the Howland Great West Dock* which he reproduces on pages 15-17 seems to have been written in the early 1700's as a description of one of the several engravings of the facility published at about that time. I have reproduced one of these on Gould's blank page 14. The copy which I was loaned to scan for this edition lacked a title page, so the present one is a modern fabrication. The illustration is a contemporary view of the Commercial Docks, from a print in my collection. The space on Gould's page 17 has a section through the entrance to Greenland Dock, which appeared in *London Docks 1800-1980 a civil engineering history* (sic) by Ivan S. Greeves. Biographical notes on James Walker, the Commercial Dock Company's Engineer, compiled by the present author, have been added to Gould's empty page 4. The illustration shows the portrait bust of Walker by Michael Rizzello at Greenland Dock.

The map on the centre pages is reproduced from a much larger folding original in Gould's edition. Part of this was missing (something had eaten much of the top edge!) and the various docks and buildings were distinguished by different coloured tints, which means that the reproduction leaves something to be desired, but I hope that readers will still find it useful. The map inside the front cover shows the area shortly after the Commercial Dock Co. had taken over and modernised Greenland Dock. That inside the back cover, dated a few years later, shows how rapid the expansion of both Rotherhithe's main dock systems had been; the competition between them was already damaging to both, but it would be 1864 before common sense prevailed and they amalgamated to form the Surrey Commercial Docks Company.

Finally, I must thank an antiquarian bookseller friend (who wishes to remain anonymous, lest it be thought that he has become a charity!) for lending a copy of the *Historical Notice* for scanning before it was sold to a collector in the USA.

Stuart Rankin, Rotherhithe, February 1998



James Walker, I.I.D, FRS (1781 -1862) was born in Falkirk, and at the age of 19, was apprenticed to his uncle, Ralph Walker who, until his dismissal in 1802, was Resident Engineer and Superintendent of Works on the construction of the West India Docks, under William Jessop. Ralph Walker was a former ship's captain in the West India Trade and planter in Jamaica. He had no engineering training, but after leaving the West India Docks, he was appointed to a similar position with the East India Docks under John Rennie, taking James with him. Ralph subsequently became engineer to the Grand Surrey Canal, at a time when that enterprise was in difficulties, and Consulting Engineer to Trinity House. He died in 1824, and has a memorial tablet in the lobby of All Saint's church, Poplar.

After working for his uncle on the East India Docks project, James set up in practice himself, in partnership with Alfred Burges, and in 1808 was appointed Engineer to the Commercial Docks Company. His first major task was to modernise Greenland Dock, building a new entrance lock, which seems to have been laid out at an angle, pointing slightly upstream, allowing a longer chamber to be built. Although not perhaps in the first rank of 19th century engineers with Robert Stephenson and I.K. Brunel, James Walker was highly respected within his profession. He succeeded his uncle as Consulting Engineer to Trinity House, designing a number of lighthouses, including the Bishop Rock. He also built canals, bridges and railways throughout Britain, and on the death of Thomas Telford became president of the Institution of Civil Engineers 1834-5. James himself died aged 81 at Edinburgh in 1862.

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Of these Docks although now forming so prominent a part of the Port of London, but little can be found authentic as to the period or purpose of the original foundation. Old Stowe states, and the tradition remains, that it was here that King Canute began his Canal to divert the course of the River Thames to Batterses, whilst he besieged London; and that in 1209 the current was similarly diverted, for the purpose of rebuilding London Bridge, which having been originally of wood, was destroyed by Fire in 1176.

Be this as it may, it existed as

HOWLAND GREAT WET DOCK

in 1660; after which date, it was added to the princely domains of the Russell Family by the marriage of Wriothesly, afterwards second Duke of Bedford, Son of the celebrated Lord William Russell, beheaded in 1680, with Elizabeth, daughter and heiress of John Howland of Streatham; in consequence of which marriage he was created Baron Howland in the lifetime of his grandfather, the first Duke. In this Family it remained until it was made a Public Dock for the Port of London; and it therefore lays claim to being the *first Public Mercantile Dock* in Great Britain; and is proved to have been in its early days of infinite service to the