

POST-WAR RECOLLECTIONS by Ivy Sharp

The late Gilbert Torry has written at length, and most succinctly, on the small Ward of Queenhithe. Masses of information is to be found in "The Book of Queenhithe" which he published in 1979, to be followed, in 1992 by a Diamond Jubilee brochure covering the period 1932-1991.

Now, we are coming up to our 75th anniversary of the birth of our Ward Club and much of its post-war history is remembered by very few. The D-Day celebrations were not repeated after 2004 as, once again, the few participants in that year will have either joined their departed comrades or be too frail to make the journey to the French coast. I am, therefore, going to attempt to capture my memories of those by-gone post-war years.

Queenhithe has been an historic area, possibly from the Roman times when the River Thames would have extended to the northern side of the present Upper Thames Street. This we know because traces of oyster shells, used for its bank, have been found that far inland. However, down the centuries, this water highway has been gradually restrained and narrowed resulting in a Saxon Harbour, on its present site, being created. A plaque has been put up commemorating King Alfred's involvement with our dock in AD898, but it only became named "Queenhithe" when Matilda, daughter of Henry I, was granted duties on imports, or tithes, landed there. Subsequent queens had similar rights.

It is said to be the last extant Saxon Harbour and thus it merits an important place in England's history. It was into this hythe that fur skins, such as conies, were imported during Shakespeare's time. In fact it was a hive of activity for centuries and even when it silted up, and was no longer usable, its flanking banks have accommodated a number of trades such as oriental carpets, and the tea trade, as well as skins.

I became involved with the area in 1948 after the City had been extensively bombed. At that time Upper Thames Street was a narrow, medieval lane, hedged in by typical Dickensian shops, small, dark and dirty. Strangely enough they had survived the onslaught of war and were being made full use of, mainly by fur traders and oriental carpet dealers, often the same people. Of course there were gaps where buildings used to stand so Eastwood & Holt built its auction house on the eastern corner of the dock. This was particularly interesting because, in addition to auctioning raw skins, they handled the most aromatic spices from the East so that the surrounding district was bathed in a marvellous perfume. Perhaps they were suitably located because, facing them, still on the Queenhithe side, was an old public toilet.

Likewise the Hudson's Bay Company bought another derelict site in Garlick Hill which firmly established Queenhithe as the hub of the fur trade. In consequence traders from all over the world flooded in, jabbering away in their various exotic languages and each making a useful contribution to our depleted economy. It was an every day occurrence to see scurrying feet beneath a load of fur-skins, on their way to customers, often worth a king's ransom, but in those days one rarely heard of anyone being attacked. Of course the smell of naphthalene was very strong, but one because inured to it.

Further enhancing the magic of the locality was the old lamp-lighter who made his twice daily rounds to light up and turn off the gas lamps. It was also the time that a battalion of soldiers, resplendent in their dress uniforms, would march up Queen Victoria Street to the Bank of England each morning to open the Bank and each evening to close it. But we were always outstanding where ceremonials were concerned.

At that time the City ruins were made quite beautiful by masses of rosebay and buddleia. Furthermore, it was a driver's paradise, if you could get petrol: no yellow lines or other restrictions, we just parked in one of the innumerable open spaces until two young men saw money in these sites. They went around the City buying up the bombed areas; they cleaned them up and then under the name of National Car Parks started charging us.

By 2004 Upper Thames Street had become one of the City's secondary or through routes and a number of its intersection streets have been closed off as a terrorist precaution. It is lined with modern buildings and several blocks of flats so that Queenhithe, today, encompasses a vast range of life. The Millennium Bridge, laughingly remembered as "the swinging bridge" is in our ward and so is the City of London School. The City boundaries were changed in 2003 thus enhancing Queenhithe.

Unfortunately no longer does the fur trade exist. Its demise occurred in 1989, following years of being attacked by hooligans. But it was like the feather trade, it had run its allotted span. Furs now are mainly used as trimmings and only in the northern climes are they needed for warmth. Fur auctions are still held in Europe, but they are a pale copy of the trade in its hey day. It is the end of an era that started in Garroway's Coffee House in the 17th century and disappeared from London in the 20th.

The tea trade, likewise disappeared from our midst, but where it is now located I do not know. Needless to say it made an important contribution to the district, being located on the river bank and extending back to Upper Thames Street. They had constructed an Italianate style colonnade along the water front, similar to those in St Mark's Square in Venice, with well proportioned offices and car park filling in the rest of the space. Tea has been a vital trading commodity in the City down the centuries so it fitted well in to our district.

Despite the loss of these trades, Queenhithe continues to thrive with the professionals; international banks have moved in, so have accountants and solicitors. Bridges now permit pedestrians to cross Upper Thames Street, which really does bisect the Ward and while it is now an efficient section of the City, it looks no different from any other part of a large town. Its charm has been relegated to the past, but for those who lived through the early post-war years it will always carry memories of what it was.

Ivy Sharp
Vice President