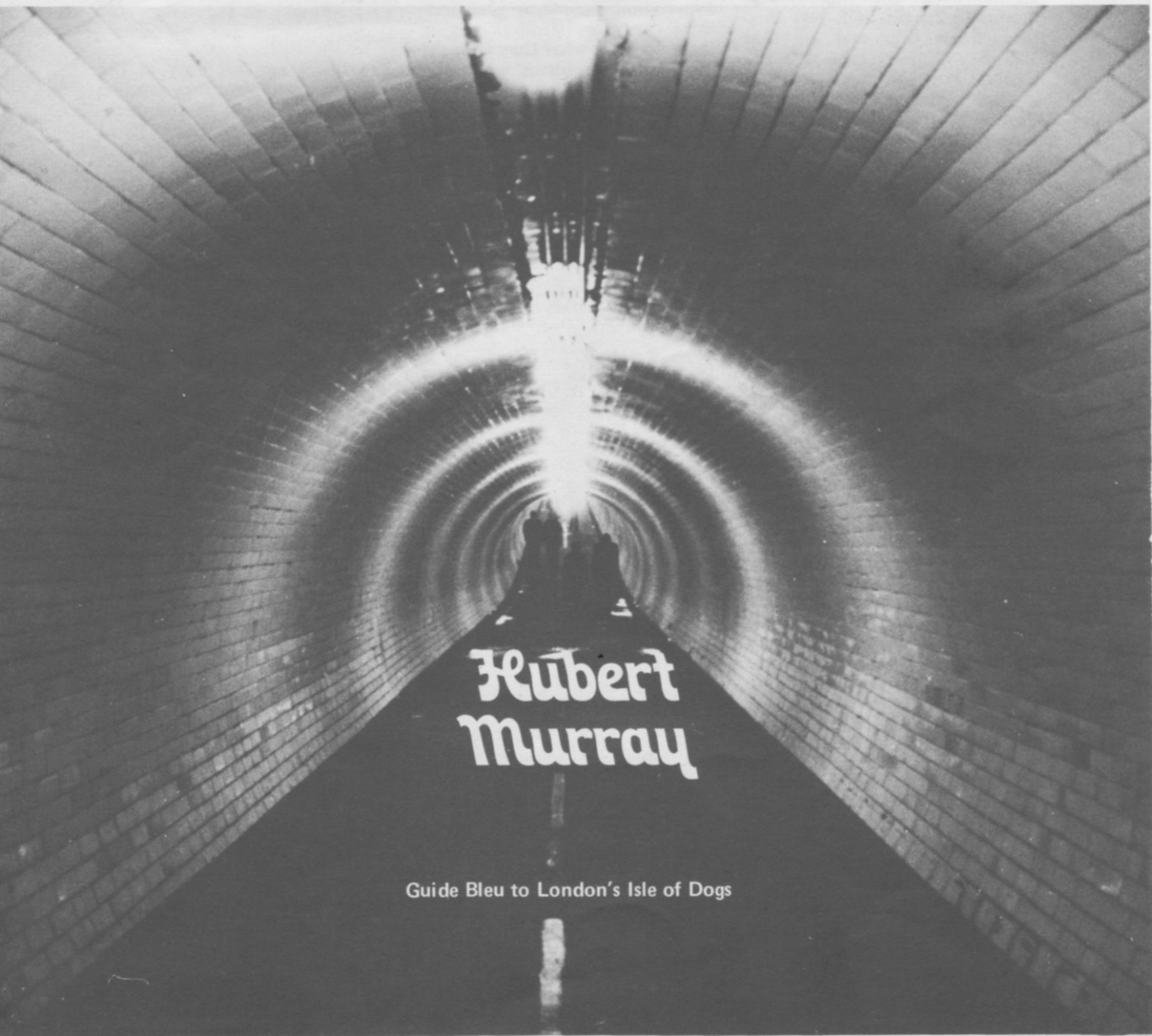


Going to the Dogs

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Hubert
Murray

Guide Bleu to London's Isle of Dogs

Going to the Dogs

"The Isle of Dogs shares with Tibet and Timbuctoo the reputation of being one of the least inhabited parts of the habitable globe. Not indeed that it is far from the centre of the world's affairs, over vast steppes and mountain ranges; it is less than four miles due east of that Mecca of civilisation, the General Post Office. Yes, there, in the capacious bosom of the East End, lies the Enchanted Isle; the limpid Thames, like the sleepless dragon of a fairy tale, coils around it; on one side of its busy Poplar and crowded Limehouse waft their strange odours and grey smoke clouds over to it; on the other the groves of Greenwich whisper of tea and shrimps." (*East End News* 10 January 1893).

In 1972, no less than in 1893, the Isle of Dogs, that appendix of the Borough of Tower Hamlets, still rejoices in a celebrated obscurity. Obscure places are often considered either funny or charming purely by virtue of their obscurity. Neasden, for example, that hitherto unsung London district, is now a standing joke in the pages of *Private Eye* magazine; it is funny because no-one (who is anyone, that is) lives there. On the other hand, if the obscurity of the Isle of Dogs does not elevate it to the drole pages of that paper, it does invest it with a certain charm which inevitably attracts to it any passing journalist who needs something to fill up space, or perhaps an architect on a day off, and anyway a student or two with a penchant for the odd.

The island is not all sweetness and light however; rather, it is something like the *femme fatale*, a charmer, until one becomes involved. For the visitor, a trip

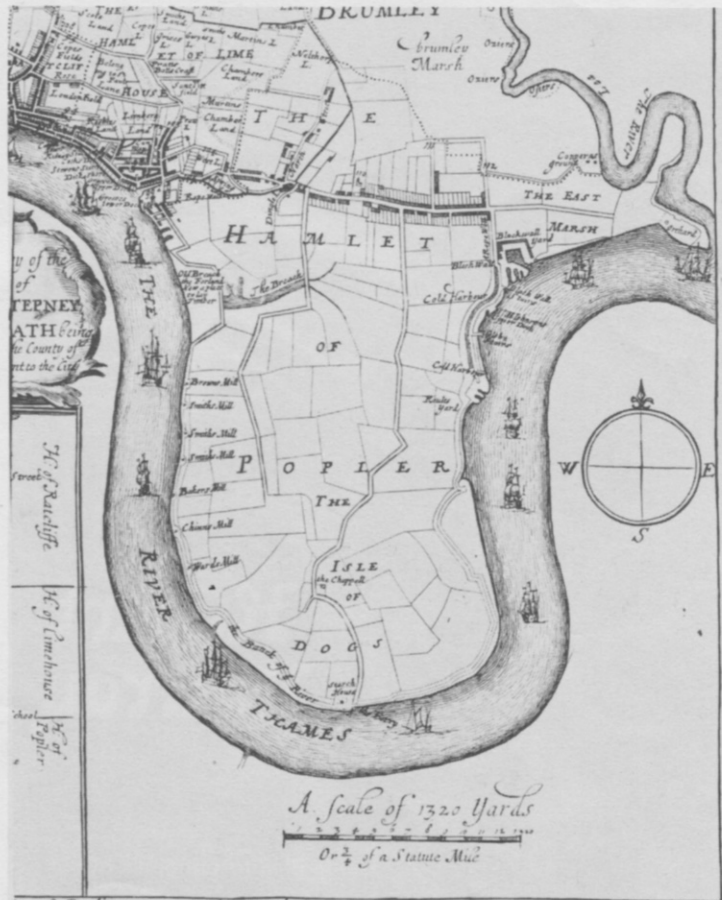
round the island is time enjoyably and interestingly spent. For the resident, life on the island is hard. And for the Council (to give it its due) it is a headache. The visitor and the resident obviously have very different views of the island, and it is with this in mind that I insert a note on the grimmer realities of the place.

Island living

As the visitor tours the island he should bear in mind its problems which are briefly summarised below and discussed in greater detail in a forthcoming report by the Council of Tower Hamlets Planning Department. This department issued a questionnaire to the islanders asking them to state what they thought the island's problems were, and then arranged them in order of frequency of statement, as follows:

- Poor bus service *most frequent*
- Lack of good shops *often*
- Lack of school places *often*
- Poor entertainment *quite often*
- Poor youth facilities *quite often*
- High flats, lack of gardens *quite often*
- Lack of play space *quite often*
- No hospital or First Aid *more than once*
- Poor pre-school play provision *more than once*
- Bad environment *more than once*
- Vandalism *more than once*
- Condition of older Council housing *more than once*
- Lack of bus shelters *more than once*

The buses are not only at the end of a route, but they are also frequently held up by the opening of the Manchester Road



Plan of Parliament 1793 for Town Survey

Bridge, so they are never reliable timekeepers, and nor are there enough of them. In the mornings school children are prevented from travelling by bus because they are not allowed on by the conductors who wish to make room for all the people who have to travel off the island to their place of work. A round-the-island flat fare service has been proposed, but is not yet in action.

Shops and schools are inadequate partly because it is held that the community is not yet large enough to support them (the island is only 600 acres with a mere 11,000 population in 1971) and partly because such change is envisaged for the area that present demand in one section of the community might outweigh future demand and thereby render *present* investment in facilities redundant in a few years' time.

This is the problem confronting the Inner London Education Authority — they say that at the moment there are too many children at primary school level for places in schools on the island, and yet they feel unable to cater for this bulge, since in five years' time it will have moved on to secondary school level and they will find themselves overinvested at primary level, and again pressed for places at secondary level. The answer lies partly in the use of portable classrooms which could be used for as long as the bulge existed and then shifted elsewhere.

Shops will come it is said, as soon as the market is large enough to make it worthwhile — until then the inhabitants must travel far afield for their provisions and tolerate the irregular bus service and the added expense of the fare.

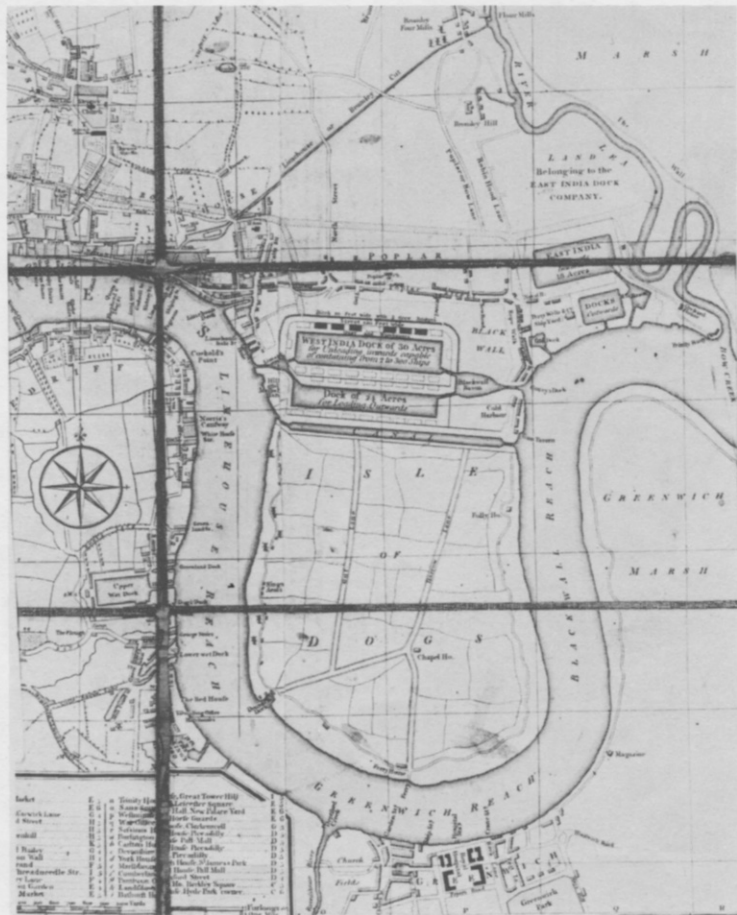
Meanwhile the islanders feel deprived, and a casual talk in the pub or over the garden fence will reveal all kinds of grievance told in the form of grim anecdote either about high grocery prices, the isolation of the community from everywhere else, or about their children who have been to a cinema or a dance three miles away in the East End proper, having to walk back because they have missed the last bus,

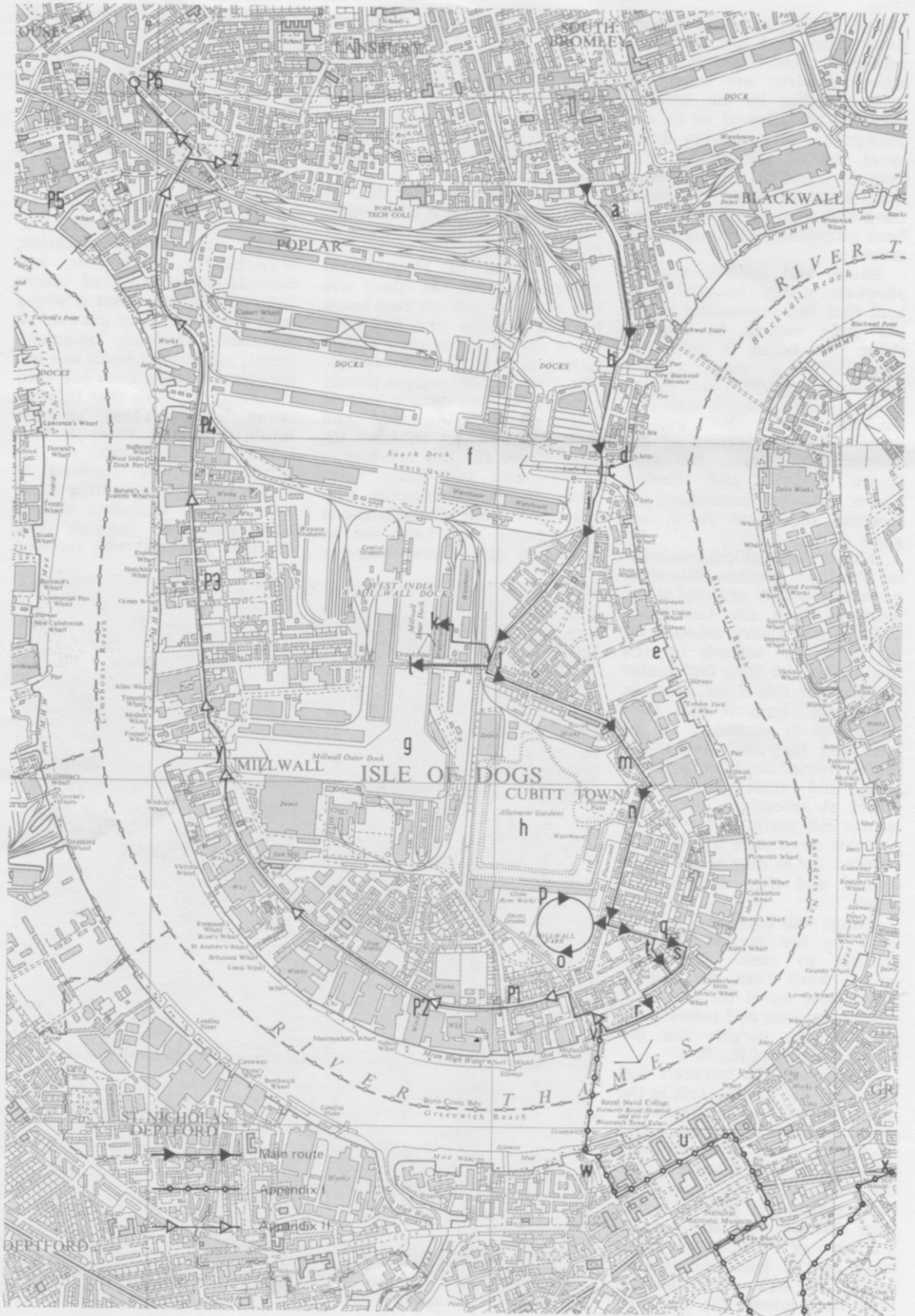
and not getting back until four in the morning because the Limehouse police have seen them going past the station in the street and they don't believe their story so they give them a roughing up and a talking to about being bloody little varmint.

The island does have distinct local colour and it is common to hear the complaint that none of the local coppers were in fact 'local' — none of them could understand what the island was like and they did not even know the old families who had been living on the island since Cubitt settled it a hundred years ago. The islanders feel unique mainly because they are unique both in terms of their problems and their pride (which is, after all, what keeps the old inhabitants there) — one still hears anecdotes about 90-year-olds who have never been off the island in their entire lives (and see no reason to do so now) and one

can view this as a sort of élitist attitude towards the rest of the world, not trusting it, even when bearing gifts; a proud, trenchant, romantic conservatism which they do not share with the more recent inhabitants who have come to live in the housing estates and whom they tend to despise.

The new arrivals, seduced by the Greater London Council into living in the Barkantine, Manchester, Schooner and Samuda Estates, are of course the ones who see what is wrong with the place. They are used to mainland facilities, mainland prices, mainland schools and bus services and they have not lived all their lives with that infernal swing bridge. These are the inhabitants who made a Unilateral Declaration of Independence (à la Rhodesia) in March 1970, appointing their own Prime Minister, voicing their grievances through their 'Foreign Minister' who received







envoys from the G.L.C. and Tower Hamlets Council. This was by no means the first manifestation of island independence, but the latest act in a long tradition.

The officers of the Tower Hamlets Planning Department and the I.L.E.A. are not the uninterested little red ribbon merchants one might conveniently assume them to be. Their programme of advocacy planning on the island (talking with residents, organising exhibitions, setting up channels of information and feedback) shows a real desire to make the place reasonable to live in. The results of all this do however leave much to be desired and fortune does not always smile upon them – their last problem for instance, is the offhand proposal made by Colin Buchanan in his report on traffic in Greenwich and Blackheath, to

the effect that much of the congestion on the roads there would be relieved if an urban motorway were run over the Isle of Dogs. Until this proposal has been properly examined for its seriousness and feasibility all development projects on the island have had to be stopped.

This guide is meant to cater for more than a mere *nostalgie de la boue*; the planners have all these problems on their minds and *a fortiori*, the residents too; the tourist will undoubtedly have a richer experience by going beyond the charm and the mug of beer, recognising these issues too, and possibly devising some answers.

Dogs Guide Bleu

The timing of the trip may have its importance: In mid-week at high tide the docks

are obviously at their busiest, which is not to say that on a Sunday at low tide they are boring, for there is always some shipping to be seen, but perhaps this should be borne in mind. Tides can be ascertained from a list in any of the national newspapers and a permit to visit the docks (weekends only) may be got from the Port of London Authority, P.O. Box 242, Trinity Square, E.C.3. (01-481 2000). They cost 25p and are valid for one year.

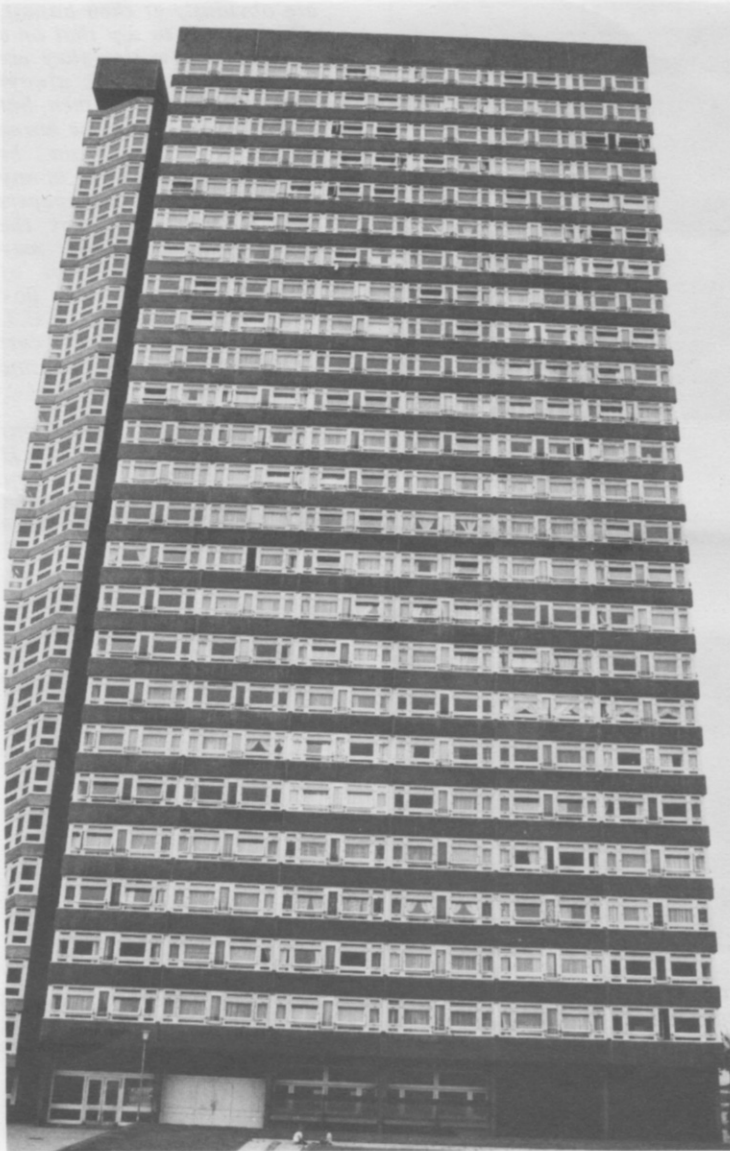
Two of the attractions accounted for in Appendix II are only enjoyable from 5 or 6 o'clock in the evening, and depending on the importance

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attached to these, that also should be noted.

Part One of the walk should take about 2 hours at an easy pace. Appendix I could occupy another 2 or 3 hours; Appendix II, anything from 1 to 5 hours, depending entirely upon one's tastes.

References 1, 2, 3 etc. refer to photographs and references a, b, c etc. to landmarks on the map. Hence (5f) refers to photograph (5) and place (f). P1 to P6 refer to pubs on the West Ferry Road.

Let us begin our tour of the island at the junction of Cotton Street with the East India Dock

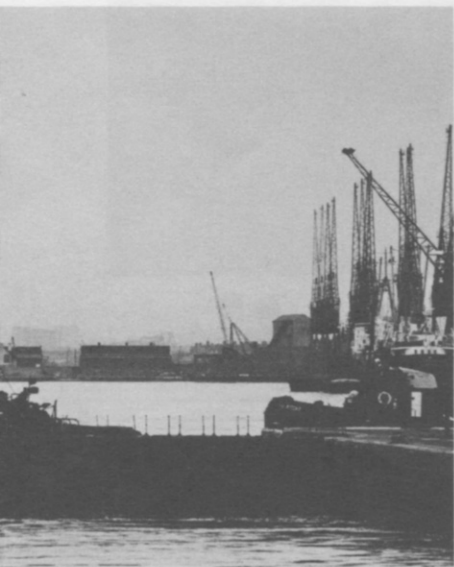
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7. Manchester Road, Cubitt Town, looking north from near the 'Queen' P.H. The ship is the 'Milverton', built in 1886 and broken up in 1925. (c.1918)



Road. Walking south down Cotton Street one very soon comes into Preston's Road, now strikingly landmarked on the left by the *Robin Hood Lane* block of flats (a) designed by Alison and Peter Smithson with a bit of help from le Corbusier and no help at all from the Blackwall Tunnel traffic on the other side. Not to digress, however, we continue south, leaving behind us on the right an excellent scrap yard where it is claimed you can get a good secondhand bath for under £2. If one is on foot it is essential not to be deterred by the next quarter-mile of grim high wall of the West India Docks on the right and the multi-storey prison-like public authority flats on the left – this stretch is thankfully not much



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indication of what is to come.

Before long one is at the *Swing Bridge* (b) which spans the original insulating streak of water recognisable as the eastern inlet into the West India Import and Export Docks which were carved out of what used to be known as the 'Poplar Gut' and before that, 'The Breach'.

Theoretically speaking, once we are over this bridge we are on the island; socially speaking, however, we have to continue south two or three hundred yards until we get to the *Manchester Road counter-balanced drawbridge* (1c) constructed in 1969 and claimed by the British Steel Corporation to be the biggest bridge of its kind anywhere. With luck it might be up, a spectacular sight in itself (2c). It must be said, however, that this bridge is and has been a perennial source of complaint amongst the islanders for many years. Even the visiting journalist of the *East End News* complains in 1893 - 'Oh! those dock bridges, so often open! so slowly ground back again! How they cut those folks of Cubitt Town off from the life and sights and advantages of the adjacent Island of Great Britain'.

If the bridge is not open, it is worth waiting for, and one can occupy one's time with a visit to *The Gun* (d) which dates from the 18th century or earlier (see



12



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1755 map) and is said to have been the scene of clandestine meetings between Lord Nelson and Lady Hamilton.

Looking south down the river from the pub one can take in for a moment that 22-storey G.L.C. horror, *Kelson House* on the Samuda Estate (3e). This tower block, though similar in design to many others elsewhere in London, has the morbid reputation of being responsible for the highest amount of suicides *per capita*, most probably on account of its depressing isolation, and its

profoundly dismal empty views over acres of warehouse roofs and grey and sombre stretches of Father Thames. If you can bear the detour, you can personally experience, even on a pleasant day, the special chill winds whipping over the concrete riverfront promenade at the foot of this monstrosity. Then spare a thought for what it must be like with an open window at the top (4e).

Having taken this in, and if the bridge is still closed, one may stand on it and look west, right down into the *South Dock*

(5f). When the West India Docks were built, this was a canal used as a short cut eliminating the two or three mile stretch around the Limehouse, Greenwich and Blackwall Reaches (see 1806 map). The canal was expanded in 1870 to form the South Dock and was joined to the West India Docks and to the *Millwall Dock* (g) which had been excavated in 1864. The diggings from this dock may still be seen as that raised stretch of ground called

the *Cubitt Town allotments* (h) between East Ferry Road and Manchester Road.

The main purpose of the docks was to provide a 'locked' deep water port unaffected by the rise and fall of tides, and to put an end to the pilfering, which by 1797 accounted for losses from ships in London of half a million pounds' worth of goods. The West India merchants had been the first to take drastic action to stop this and by 1802

they had built the West India docks and surrounded them with an impregnable wall, with guard-houses at intervals for the use of troops. There seems to be some disagreement as to who actually designed the docks; Pevsner says it was William Jessop who did them from 1799-1802, and J. M. Richards offers two versions; firstly Ralph Walker and John Rennie and then later, George and Joseph Gwilt. Summerson at least offers the indisputable

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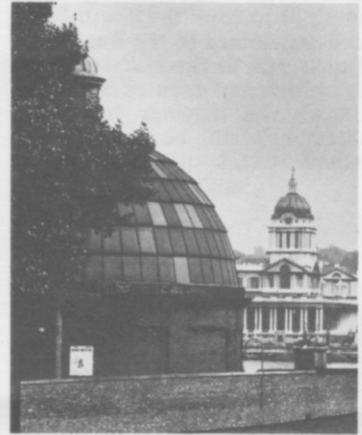


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judgement that the 'West India Dock was the first and remains the finest', saying of the warehouses dividing the Import and Export docks that they were 'designed with taste and precision, and serving their purpose today as naturally as they did when the biggest ships in the dock were 750-ton Indiamen'. Since Summerson wrote of course, many ships have grown too large for these docks which are now programmed to be replaced by larger ones downriver at Tilbury.

Continuing south from the bridge we now begin to glimpse several of those romantic views of ships' hulls towering over the back gardens of the islanders' houses (6i). And how much more impressive still are those photographs of the old wind-

a look at yourself in the looking-glass windows (8) of the *Fred Olsen Operations and Amenity Centre* sandwiched between the giant warehouses (k) of the Millwall Dock. This purist gem, completed in 1968 by Foster Associates, is a masterpiece of refinement, a rare quality, entirely inappropriate in the context, one cannot help feeling as one looks upon a whole 14' 0" x 6' 0" panel of this pristine mirror wall which has been smashed in either by a fork lift truck or a well aimed rock. This and the elevated passenger gangway alongside (also by Foster Associates) are well worth a look however, and if your heart is not so bold, or the policeman does not like your smile, they may be seen at not such close quarters from the



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steel framed *pedestrian walkway* (9i) leading from Glengall Grove over the dock to Tiller Road. Retracing a few steps and coming down off the walkway back into the road again, walk down Glengall Grove, past the refurbished school, and turn right into Manchester Road, past *Jubilee Crescent* (m) on your right, and right again into *Stebondale Street* (n). Walking down this street one passes what amounts to a catalogue of 1930-1970 London public authority housing, from Kingfield Street to the Schooner Estate (10), (11), (12), (13).

Halfway down on the right is the entrance to the *Cubitt Town Recreation Ground* which has an adventure playground, and two

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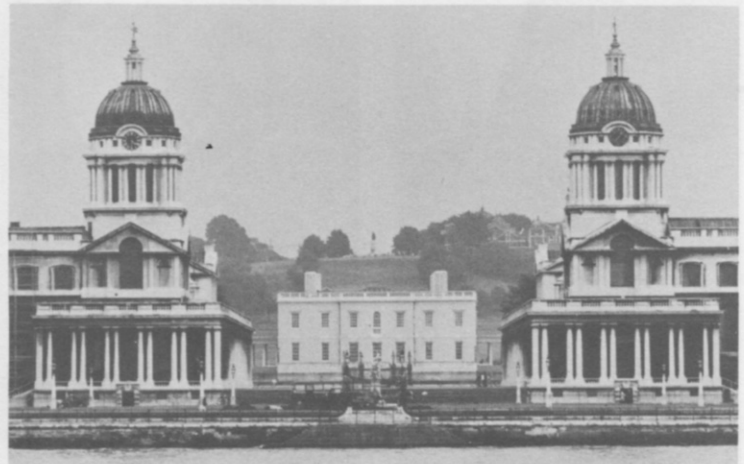


jammers stretching their bowsprits right over the public thoroughfare or the Monday wash (7).

Turn now down East Ferry Road (formerly called Harrow Lane when this was some of the best and most expensive water-meadow grazing in the country) - continue past these rather modest examples of post-war public housing until you get to the junction with Glengall Grove (named after the Countess of Glengall who used to own the area). Here on the right is one of the *Dock Gates* (j). If you have a permit and it is a weekend you should have no trouble in getting in here. If on the other hand you do not have one, but instead have a bold heart and sweet smile you may get yourself past the policeman on duty and take



18



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remarkable pieces of architecture, the first and more obvious being the *railway viaduct* (14o) (now disused) whose long string of arches can be appreciated for what they are; and secondly there is that long, low, windowless, very narrow building, whose function remains obscure until one consults a local inhabitant or the 6-inch map; it turns out to be the *Globe Rope Works* (p), now disused. The shape seems so literal for a rope works, too obvious to guess at, so one is surprised and delighted at the answer.

Coming out of the park by the same gate, back into Stebondale Street, look down Glengarnock Avenue and walk towards *Christ Church* (15, 16q) built in 1852 by Thomas Cubitt.



21

the well-known builder (17), to serve as the spiritual centre of Cubitt Town. Cubitt developed this bit of the Isle of Dogs from 1850 onwards and in fact lived here himself. The present streets in this corner of the island lie in substantially the same way as they did when Cubitt built here, and it is said they follow the lines of the original marsh drains. It was Cubitt who left the plot of land which is now *Island Gardens* (r) to the Greenwich Commissioners in the hope that middle class residences would develop there. The Commissioners appear to have been less idealistic, so they laid a lawn instead. According to Neil Kelly writing in 'Time Out' magazine however, this part of

the island 'has become one of the first enclaves for the estate agents and the property speculators in the East End... As yet you can only see the foundations of the £25,000 houses that are going up there. Who is buying them? Actresses, say the locals, sounding the familiar death knell of any London neighbourhood'. So Cubitt is maybe getting his way in the end.

Standing beside *Christ Church* at the corner of Manchester Road and Glengarnock Avenue and supposing oneself to be a little peckish, then depending on the time of day, one could either go to the river end of Glengarnock Avenue and have a snack and a beer at the *Waterman's Arms* (s) (TV-famous for its live

traditional jazz every evening except Monday) or on the other hand one could go down Manchester Road a few steps and have something basic and filling at *Edie's Cafe* (18t). Having eaten, one may now turn into Saunders Ness Road and relax and digest in *Island Gardens* (r). From here one has the celebrated view of the *Royal Buildings of Greenwich* (19u), painted by Canaletto amongst others, a scene across the river which quite deserves its reputation. The Royal Naval College which can now be seen in all its glory (the work of Wren, Hawksmoor and Vanburgh in that order) in fact stands upon the very site of Placentia, the Tudor Palace at Greenwich, demolished

by order of Charles II. It is thought that the name 'the Isle of Dogs' derives from the fact that the royal hunting dogs were kennelled on the island so that their Tudor masters should have uninterrupted sleep in their palace on the other side.

Here also, in the south-west corner of the gardens, under a glass Edwardian echo of the magnificent Wren domes across the river, is the entrance to the *foot tunnel to Greenwich* (20v)



22



23

which takes one under the Thames to emerge beside the *Cutty Sark*.

At this juncture we are at the end of the first part of the tour; the second part consists of two alternatives, Appendix I and Appendix II.

Appendix I

If it were 4.00 p.m. or before and you still had some energy left, it would undoubtedly be interesting to take a trip through the *foot tunnel* (opening picture) (with its glazed brick and cold light reminiscent of scenes from 'Alphaville') and have a look at Greenwich with its fine collection of Inigo Jones, Wren, Vanburgh, Hawksmoor and the *Cutty Sark* all on one spot (w), not to mention the naval hagiography in the Museum. Trains back to Charing Cross go from Maze Hill station (x).

Appendix II

If it were after 4.00 p.m. and closer to 5 or 6 o'clock one could walk or take a bus up the *West Ferry Road*. The timing is quite important here because the main attractions are the pubs:—

- P1 *Lord Nelson*: Old Time music on Friday and Saturday.
- P2 *The Vulcan*: GoGo Girls every night.
- P3 *The Tooke Arms*: Groups on Friday and Saturday. This pub is adjacent to the Barkantine Estate and has therefore been 'contem-

P6 *The Londoner*: this also proclaims itself as having drag every night, and since its international clientele of sailors-in-port seems to think its okay, it must be.

If travelling up the West side of the island seems to have developed into a bit of a pub crawl, one can only plead that it is because the Islander, as an East Ender, only more so, likes his drink.

West Ferry Road has branches off containing the older housing stock of the island such as in *Hesperus Crescent*

The West Ferry Road however, if you are not a drinker, is grim. It was this side of the island which was lined with windmills used for pumping water from the low-lying land and giving the name Millwall to the area, but really there is no visual evidence for that now.

At the north end of the road, where it runs into the West India Dock Road, stand with your back to the Transport and General Workers' Union offices and walk over the traffic island into Pennyfields: here at the *Young Friends* (z) Chinese Restaurant one finds oneself in the centre of what used to be the old Chinatown of the East End, but perhaps at this stage, more to the point, eating an excellent meal for a very reasonable price.

If the traveller wishes to go a few steps farther on to *The Londoner* (P 6) this guide can only wish him well. The way back West is on a No.15 Bus.



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- P4 *The City Arms*: DRAG EVERY NIGHT proclaimed in bright letters all over the facade.
- P5 *The Grapes*: we are now strictly speaking 'off the Dogs', but this has to be included as being featured in 'Our Mutual Friends' — it is in Narrow Street, E.14 and can be found with a bit of looking.

(21), some of the more spectacularly gloomy dwelling units (22), the brave new world of the *Barkantine Estate* (23) all running off this highly congested road.

As you cross the bridge of the South Dock you will likely as not find yourself rubbing noses with a ship in dock (24y), and if you favour such views, stop off for a bit in Norman's Nosh Bar (sic) which is only a few yards away.

Notes and acknowledgements

I should like to thank the Librarian of the Tower Hamlets Local History Library for his help in sorting out material. The photograph of the Milverton overhanging Manchester Road is reproduced by courtesy of the London Borough of Tower Hamlets Amenities Committee. I should also like to thank those in the GLC Maps Collection Room who gave permission for the reproduction of both historical maps printed here.

Mr. Holt of the Tower Hamlets Council Planning Department gave a lot of his time to discussing the problems of the Island with me, furnishing me with maps, documents and a lot of help.

For the occasional points on architectural history I have referred variously to:

Peysner, N.: 'Buildings of England' — London (except the Cities of London and Westminster) Penguin Books 1952
 Richards, J. M.: *The Functional Tradition* (i) Architectural Review, July 1957, (ii) in book form with same title, Architectural Press, 1958.
 Summerson, J.: *Georgian London*. Penguin Books.