



On the Docks

An Oral History of London's Dock Workers



On the Docks

For hundreds of years people living along the river in East and Southeast London have found work loading and unloading ships. The people who worked on the docks have had a profound influence on the history of London and on the labour movement.

"On the Docks" is an oral history project that explores the history of London's dock workers, the stevedores, dockers and tally clerks. It has focussed on the fascinating history of the people who worked on the docks of London from the 1930s onwards. It explores their working lives and how the docks shaped whole communities in London for centuries up until their closure in the 1980s.

Children from Riverside Primary School and Westminster Cathedral Primary school have worked with the Museum of London Docklands, historians, actors and retired dock workers and their families to explore this history. After in-depth training the children met and interviewed 24 older and retired workers. These interviews have been edited to make a wonderful new documentary film. Children also produced creative and historical writing for the project. The film, the full interviews and the writing are all available to watch along with photos on the project website here...

www.thamesdockers.org.uk

You can read some of the children's writing in this booklet on the following pages.



A boat trip on the Thames to explore the history of the docks.



Workshops at the Museum of London Docklands and at school.





Conducting oral history interviews.





Some History

The children interviewed 24 older retired dock workers during this project. Here are just a few of the key dates they spoke about.

1889 The “*Dockers Tanner Strike*” when thousands of impoverished, unskilled dock workers went on strike for improved wages and better working conditions. This successful strike led to the creation of the first dockers union and was a huge step for the labour movement in Great Britain.

1936 The Battle of Cable Street. Thousands of dock workers stood with the Jewish community in East London to resist a march of British Fascists led by Oswald Mosely.

1939-45 World War Two. Dock workers continued working throughout the war, facing appalling danger as the German Airforce concentrated massive bombing raids on the docks.

1948 The establishment of the *National Dock Labour Board* improved the conditions of dock workers by offering a scheme to ensure that only registered workers could work on the docks. This gave them the right to work on the docks for life and to receive *fallback pay* in the event there was no work.

1967 After the *Devlin Report* condemned working conditions in London's docks, unions fought to improve the life of workers, not least making dock workers direct employees of the dock firms for the first time - this was known as *decasualisation*.



1972 *The Pentonville Five*. Dock workers who organised a strike to protect their jobs were imprisoned in Pentonville under new industrial labour legislation. Under pressure from mass protests and the threat of a general strike across the UK these five were released.

1989 The government abolished the *National Dock Labour Scheme* and dock workers lost their job security. This was the culmination of a series of developments that led to the end of the docks in London. Containerisation meant that all that was needed to unload a ship was a crane, while ships became too large to get up the Thames and into the docks. At the same time greater competition from other ports meant there was less work. Finally, pressure from investors wishing to develop the land along the Thames meant that the old wharves and docks were in demand for new uses. Dock work moved down the Thames to Tilbury and to other ports around the UK.

Description of the Docks

A dock is a place for reloading and unloading cargoes from different places in the world. "Dock" (originating from the Dutch word dok) normally refers to a dockyard (also known as a shipyard) where the loading, unloading, building, or repairing of ships occurs. Working on the docks was one of the main jobs for men in the East End of London back in the day. People working on the docks were friends and they were friends for life. If somebody betrayed them, they never forgot it.



Dockers Slang

- some definitions

Top Hand

Each gang had a 'Top Man' to control the direction for the crane driver to drop cargo in the ship's hold.

Bomping On

After 1947 men who were not successful in getting a day's work would get a stamp on a card which meant they would receive "fall back" money from the National Dock Labour Board.

Ice Cream Man

The official rat catcher who dressed in white.

Babies Heads

Refers to the steak and kidney puddings made in round dishes by docker's wives.

Beach Comber

Man employed to keep the quays clear of rubbish.

Ceiling

This is actually the floor of a ship or barge.

Air Raid Committee

A nickname for the Union Committee who would come in to settle disputes between workers and employers.

Muggo

Time for a tea break.

Cold Pot

Cold storage depots.

Snow Banging

When working in cold storage depots and cold pots.

Tom Pepper

Dockers name for someone who could lie his way out of an awkward situation.

Greenacre

Word for an accident, such as a load of cargo falling from a crane.

Brass Tally Man

Before the second world war dock workers would hand in a oval shaped brass coin at the beginning of a day's work and collect it at the end of the day with their pay.

A Dusty

A dirty job such as unloading coal, cement or lamp black.

Dirty Money

Dockers received different rates of pay depending on the cargo. They got more for unloading particularly filthy cargoes.

White Mice

The frozen lamb carcasses wrapped in muslin.



People who worked on the docks worked together and played together. The social life revolved around the pub and also home where the front room often contained a piano or other musical instrument. Each dock also had their own football team and the National Dock Labour Board owned several sports grounds.

An Imagined Diary

Friday 13th September 1957

Dear Diary,

My alarm went off - it was time to start the day. It was around 6am, the perfect time to get ready for work. As I got dressed into my dungarees and vest top, I noticed that my watch had already reached 6:30AM! I had to go! NOW! Surprisingly, I was the first one to get to stand on the stones. My hopes were high that today, finally, I would be chosen to work. As was soon joined by others. All of a sudden, I heard a rock hit the ground behind me. I turned my head..... a stampede of men was charging towards me. I panicked. Suddenly, a ganger pointed at me and offered me work unloading - I gratefully accepted. I found the ship and started to unload the sugar with a gang of men. It was quite easy because I was standing on a high pier, not sweating down in the hull of the ship. My trusty hook helped me out a lot so 5 hours later, the whole ship was unloaded. I was so proud of myself but exhausted.





Dock Workers

There were many jobs on the docks such as stevedores, dock labourers, tally clerks, lightermen and others. All of these jobs were very important. After the second world war, to get a job you needed to be registered on the National Dock Labour Board Scheme. This scheme was set up to improve workers security and also to reduce conflict between workers and the dock owners. To work you also needed to be in the union. Once you had this you needed to wake up early so you could go and **stand on the stones** joining hundreds of other men hoping to be picked by a ship worker to unload or load a ship.

If you got a job you would join a "Gang" of men who would work together in groups of 12 or 13 to work on a ship. This work might last a few days or, if you were lucky, a few weeks.

If you did not get a job you needed to get a book stamped proving you were willing to work. Then you would receive "fallback pay" which was a small amount, much less than if you worked.

In the ships there could be any cargo; rum, bananas, sugar, lamb/meat, wool, steam engines and even the occasional live elephant. Britain also exported lots of machinery which had to be loaded.

Work conditions were dangerous. People got killed or injured by many things while trying to lift them into or out of ships and barges. Cargos were hazardous and masks, gloves and overalls non-existent. Things improved after the *Devlin Report* of 1967 but the days of the docks in London were numbered.



On the Docks was developed and produced by digital:works (Sav Kyriacou and Matthew Rosenberg) and funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund and Unite the Union.

This booklet contains pieces written by Year 6 children from Riverside Primary School and Westminster Cathedral Primary School.

The film contains interviews with dock workers and their families developed and filmed by the children.

We would like to thank:

All of the Year 6 children from Riverside Primary School and Westminster Cathedral Primary School;
The staff at Riverside Primary School and at Westminster Cathedral Primary School;
Emma Smailes and the team at The Museum of London Docklands;
Deborah Levett and everyone at the Friends of Island History Trust;
Danny Freeman and the team at Unite;
Unite Retired Members, Custom House Branch;
and all of the interviewees who generously shared their time and stories.

Image Credits:

Henry Grant Collection/Museum of London.
PLA Collection/Museum of London.
The Rotherhithe Picture Library and the interviewees.

You can listen to all of the wonderful interviews in their entirety, see the film, and find out more about the project on the project website:

www.thamesdockers.org.uk





www.thamesdockers.org.uk | www.digital-works.co.uk

digital:works 
participation through creative media

**Funding raised by
The National Lottery**
and awarded by the Heritage Lottery Fund

