11. The Redevelopment of Rotherhithe

Most parts of London have seen redevelopment since 1945 as a result of wartime bombing and of changing economic patterns, but the changes which have occurred in the districts that made up the prewar Port of London are of an altogether more drastic order than those elsewhere. The chapter on the Surrey Docks has recounted how new methods of handling cargo and a huge increase in the size of ships sent Rotherhithe's staple trades downstream, leaving a massive area of docks and wharves redundant. In addition, the growth of road transport at the expense of transport by railway and by river, tended to drive out industries which came to prefer good road access. No doubt there was also a bandwagon effect: industrial decline discourages survivors.

A summary account of Rotherhithe's recent redevelopment necessarily divides into two parts: changes up to 1981, and changes which took place after that date under the aegis of the London Docklands Development Corporation. This corporation was set up by the central government to override the planning powers of the boroughs of the former dock areas. From 1981 until December 20th, 1996, the corporation considered all the building schemes put forward for Rotherhithe. It was originally suggested that the corporation was needed because too little had been done to revive derelict areas. In the case of Rotherhithe, this view undoubtedly belittled what Southwark Council had done until 1981. The draining of most of the docks, and the laying out of roads and services, had to precede the more noticeable phase of redevelopment, in which new buildings were erected and derelict areas returned to life. One criticism which may be made of the process in most of its phases is that there was a tendency to favour large-scale schemes. Planning can stop particular patterns, but it cannot make others happen. Those which would naturally occur without encouragement would generally be small-scale. In the days before modern planning, industrial growth was almost always a jigsaw of small developments rather than a story of a few large-scale enterprises. The Surrey Docks themselves came from several disparate initiatives. At times, redevelopment has arguably been an anti-commercial process. An obvious example was the refusal in the 1980s to accommodate the hualage firms such as WBS Transport which had survived around the former docks. The comment that a barge-repairing works at 93-97 Rotherhithe Street was 'very noisy' could only have been made by somebody who had no sympathy with industrial Rotherhithe. Then there was the aspect of social change. The remark made on behalf of the development corporation in respect of Charlie Lunn's cafe on the Redriff Estate that 'there's no room any more for a working man's cafe' was decidedly dismissive of the area's traditions.

The historic centre of Rotherhithe around St. Mary's Church has seen, appropriately, the most restoration of existing buildings, chiefly wharves, in contrast to replacement building. Elsewhere, very few old buildings have been retained. In the whole of Rotherhithe Street beyond the former Surrey Dock, the only significant survivors among commercial and public buildings are Globe Wharf, Canada Wharf, the fire station at Pageant's Wharf and buildings in and around Nelson Dock. To these survivors we must add the whole of Greenland and South Docks, part of Lavender Dock plus the Lavender Pump House, the Surrey Basin (now Surrey Water), part of Canada Dock and the former dock offices near Lower Road. A great deal of the attraction of the new developments lies in their proximity to water. Without such settings, the impression given would be bleaker.

New houses and flats account for the greater part of Rotherhithe's redevelopment by area. Commercial and industrial use is much less prominent, although it is true that more such use might yet emerge in the centre of the peninsula. Upon first consideration, it is surprising that commerce and industry is found inland rather than in the detached strip along the riverfront or in the vicinity of the surviving docks. The preference of industry for road transport, however, plus the value of settings by water to sell houses and flats, explain the geography of redevelopment.

A tour of new Rotherhithe might conveniently divide into three: Rotherhithe Street; Redriff Road and Greenland Dock; and the centre of the peninsula. If we begin in Rotherhithe Street at its western end, the first landmark to notice is Corbett's Wharf. This was converted into flats by Michael Baumgarten in 1983. A traditional wharf was saved by private expenditure, which necessarily dictated the sale of the new flats at high prices to outsiders. This was criticised at the time, but without that expenditure the wharf would probably have gone. Opposite, there is a different type of conversion: the renovated blocks of the Millpond Estate. The estate was built before the war by Bermondsey Borough Council and certainly needed restoration by the 1980s. The external changes made to these blocks are paralleled elsewhere in Rotherhithe Street: a new architectural treatment to the entrances and stairways, new windows, new roofs, and measures to improve the appearance of the immediate surroundings. Similar work was carried out on the block in Cathay Street, where a particularly pleasing
feature is the shield of arms of the old Borough of Bermondsey over the doors at each end. This block faces the visible foundations of King Edward III's mansion. The south side of this site has lately been used to build terraced houses: a revival of a normal urban housing type from before the First World War.

The riverfront in this vicinity is open except for the Angel and the tall, lonely building which is 41 Rotherhithe Street. To the south there is rather rough parkland back to Jamaica Road. All this constituted a scheme which was earlier and quite separate from the redevelopment of the docks. Long ago the London County Council proposed to extend Southwark Park to the river, and this idea was more or less completed in 1979, under the Greater London Council. It was accompanied by the widening of parts of Jamaica Road and Lower Road, and the building of a large roundabout opposite the entrance to Rotherhithe Tunnel. This scheme was enormously destructive and might be considered the least acceptable of all the postwar changes in Rotherhithe. It razed most of the western part of Rotherhithe's historic centre. Mayflower Street, Clark's Orchard, Fulford Street and Seven Step Alley - which were among the most ancient streets of the area - all disappeared (or practically did so); Paradise Street east of Cathay Street lost all its buildings except St. Peter's Church; the eastern part of Jamaica Road was bereft of countless shops, pubs and houses (including the house in which Lee Boo had lived), and Christ Church, and was considerably widened. It resembles a motorway rather than an urban main street. When the previous road pattern existed, there were many shops and public buildings at the eastern end of Jamaica Road and the western part of Lower Road, making the area near Rotherhithe Tunnel lively and recognisable as a town centre. Now it is almost all given over to traffic. On the riverfront affected by the scheme, it was hugely regrettable that the historic houses adjoining the Angel were demolished in the mid-1960s (except for No. 41, whose owners were successful in resisting the London County Council). They formed an attractive and popular group, in which Sir John Betjeman and Anthony Armstrong-Jones once lived.

Of the various wharves near St. Mary's, Hope Sufferance Wharf was much in the news in the 1970s. It was acquired by the Industrial Buildings Preservation Trust in 1974 for conversion to house forty craftsmen. Southwark Council took it over in 1977. The scheme flourished for a few years but was eventually closed. A re-conversion for housing is the likely permanent solution. This would mirror the reuse of the nearby Thames Tunnel Mills by the London and Quadrant Housing Association in 1980-3. The much-admired conversion there was carried out by Hunt Thompson Associates for £2.1 million. The 80 ft. chimney was retained. Two further conversions in the area were well-known for some years. One was the use of 99 Rotherhithe Street for the Crunchy Frog Theatre Project for a few years from 1974. Originally, it served as a studio for artists involved in animation. Nearby, and for a much longer period, Grice's Granary was used by Sands Films and for the Rotherhithe Picture Research Library.

East of Grice's Granary, in Rotherhithe Street, there are many older buildings, including the premises of Charles Hay & Son Ltd. at No. 135. Next door there is an open space where Cumberland Wharf stood. The stretch of road eastwards to the Surrey Lock is still largely in process of development, apart from the new housing on the south side. Beyond the lock two big new buildings catch the eye: the youth hostel on the site between Rotherhithe Street and Salter Road, and the Spice Island, a public house, near the riverfront. A little farther along there are two developments with good architectural details: Tideway Court (on the south side) and Quayside Lodge, a Barratt's scheme boasting an attractive cupola (north of the road). This is where Bull Head Dock once stood. Barratt's is one of the major builders in the area, with about half a mile of the new riverfront buildings to its credit. The Amos Estate (opposite), one of Bermondsey Council's prewar estates, was bought by the development corporation in 1985 and was then converted in a similar way to the Millpond Estate. Much
The Redevelopment of Rotherhithe

farther along Rotherhithe Street there is the series of developments on the waterfront, beginning with Frederick Square, opposite the Three Companys', all with Classical pediments, arched lower windows and Georgian doorways. The architectural quality of this work is well above average. Pageant Steps, opposite Heron Place, is another new building with a cupola. Round the bend of Rotherhithe Street we come to the Holiday Inn Hotel at Nelson Dock. This was opened in 1991 as the Scandic Crown Hotel and was renamed in 1996. The developer was the Scandinavian firm, Islet, and the architects were Kjaer and Richter. A three-masted barque built in 1932 has been installed on a slipway of the old dock, a hugely enjoyable touch. Downriver, we come to the Surrey Docks Farm, which occupies part of the 18th-century Wellsees' shipyard. The development corporation gave £355,000 towards the costs of this popular establishment. It moved to this site in 1986.

Surrey Docks Farm definitely brings the visitor 'Downtown', where Rotherhithe Street has traditionally met Redriff Road. The principal road which reaches this junction today is Salter Road, the new ring road round most of the peninsula. It commemorates Dr. Alfred Salter, the prewar Member of Parliament for Bermondsey. Near this junction there are the renovated Redriff Estate, the Docklands Settlement, a few old public houses (with unaltered names) and some modern riverside developments. Custom House Reach was built in the 1960s, before the docks closed; the huge complex next door, New Caledonian Wharf, is much more recent.

Redriff Road is the main road from which the visitor gains access to the developments surrounding the Greenland Dock. The scale of some of these developments is considerable. The vicinity of Norway Gate is almost a new town in itself. Just upstream of Greenland Dock, there is the substantial development called Greenland Passage, in Portland stone and yellow stock brick, which was designed for Islet U.K. Ltd. by Kjaer and Richter, as in the case of Nelson Dock. Islet is a Danish company, and hence the laying of the foundation stone here by the Danish Ambassador in 1986. Greenland Dock itself is mostly surrounded by housing, and the view is enhanced by the many boats which are moored at the river end of it. Boats are particularly numerous in the adjoining South Dock, for it boasts a 250-berth marina and a watersports' centre, which opened in 1990 and for which the development corporation provided £1 million. Baltic Quay, at the west end of the dock, is a large glass-clad, steel-framed building, reflecting recent architects' fondness for the arch as a major motif.

The centre of the peninsula was perhaps most at issue in the planning debates of the 1970s and 1980s, and yet it is still the least finished part. This is not for want of money and effort, for the flagship of the developments, the Surrey Quays Shopping Centre (opened in 1988), cost £35 million. In 1998 an Undergraduate station on the new Jubilee Line, to be called Canada Water, is due to be opened nearby. This new economic centre of Rotherhithe may be reached via Surrey Quays Road, where the old economic centre - the Surrey Docks' offices of 1887 - still stand. For some years they served as the development corporation's local headquarters.

The largest commercial building beyond the shopping centre is the one belonging to Associated Newspapers, publishers of the Daily Mail and the Evening Standard. It is a printing plant, near Canada Street, which opened in 1989. In this vicinity, the Canadian connections of the old docks are kept alive. General Wolfe's capture of Quebec in 1759 underlies the new street-names to an extent which would have warmed the patriotic heart of a David Garrick.

Mention was made in chapter 10 of many schools, the histories of which were recounted until early this century at the latest. Their more recent histories are parts of the story of the peninsula's redevelopment. Rotherhithe's oldest school foundation, that of Peter Hills, is now housed in a new building north of Salter Road, roughly on the site of St. Paul's Church. The new school represents also the old St. Mary's School which used to stand in Lower Road and is therefore the Church of England's primary school for Rotherhithe. Another old primary school in new premises (opened in 1990) is Redriff School, off Salter Road. This was one of the London County Council's primary schools and formerly stood in Rotherhithe Street, near the present Surrey Docks Farm. A third primary school, called Alfred Salter School, is an entirely new foundation and is yet another memorial of the good doctor. It was formally opened on October 31st, 1995, in premises whose architectural details are impressive. Nearby there is a fourth primary school, St. John's, which serves the Roman Catholic community and is run in association with the Church of Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception in St. Elmos Road. All these schools have received large grants from the development corporation, but by far the largest grant (£3.7 million) went to the area's only secondary school, Bacon's College. This is a City Technology College and represents a foundation which goes back to the early 18th century in neighbouring Bermondsey. Its present building in Timber Pond Road was opened in 1991.
Recreation has not been forgotten in the redevelopment of Rotherhithe. A large area running north-south was set aside in 1980 as the Russia Dock Woodland. Two years later the Lavender Pond Nature Park was inaugurated. This is associated with the adjoining pump house, which once kept up the water levels in the docks and is now the Rotherhithe Heritage Museum. A collection of items found by Ron Goode on the foreshore of the Thames is a key attraction. A further open space is the Stave Hill Ecological Park, extending to five and a half acres. It opened in 1986. Off Salter Road there is the Surrey Docks Stadium, which is the ground of Fisher Athletic Football Club. This ground and the watersports' centre mentioned earlier are the only major sporting facilities in the peninsula. It remains to point out that Rotherhithe's oldest sporting venue, Southwark Park, saw a considerable development in 1980, when a new sports' complex was completed. It included an astroturf football pitch.

All these substantial developments which have been described in this chapter have altered Rotherhithe to a very great extent. Its economy, its buildings, its population and even the layout of many of its streets have changed markedly. A visitor who had last arrived in, say, the 1950s would discern only a few familiar landmarks among the new developments. These changes have been among the most momentous in Rotherhithe's history and are ones whose effects will not be fully clear for some years yet. History is truly being made in our own day.

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**Bibliography**

The first book in any bibliography of Rotherhithe must be Edward Josselyn Beck's *Memorials to serve for a History of the Parish of St. Mary, Rotherhithe* (Cambridge University Press, 1907). It was the product of a forty-year acquaintance from a privileged vantage-point. The book has much excellent detail, especially on the Parish Church of St. Mary, its daughter-churches, schools and local personalities of the 18th and 19th centuries. It omits a description of much local industry, however, and it was written without access to many sources which are available today. Finally, the fact that it was published 90 years ago means that it does not address such subjects as the Second World War and the great changes which have arisen from the closure of the Surrey Commercial Docks. The work is substantial, but not comprehensive.

Beck's predecessor as Rector of Rotherhithe, Edward Blick, wrote *A Short Account of the Churches, Schools and Charities in the Parish of St. Mary, Rotherhithe* (1847). It gives details of his own work from 1835 and offers historical details of some charities. A later and wide-ranging account of local charities is provided in *Endowed Charities (County of London)*, Vol. II, compiled by the Charity Commission and published by order of Parliament in 1899.


Useful general information can be obtained from the *Bermondsey Official*