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WEST INDIA QUAY, LONDON

CHAPTER XIV

Limehouse Hole

The riverside district north of Millwall was, until recently, known as Limehouse Hole. The name was in use by the seventeenth century and seems originally to have designated a part of the river itself.¹ It reflects the area's historically greater links with Limehouse than with either Poplar or the Isle of Dogs. Limehouse Hole can be taken to stretch southwards from the parish boundary to the South West India Dock (Impounding) entrance lock and inland to include Garford Street (Plate 42a; fig. 141). This was one of the first parts of the parish of Poplar to be developed, but almost nothing survives of the early fabric, and the dominating feature in the area is now Westferry Circus (Plate 152). As London's riverside was developed, and Limehouse spread eastwards in the seventeenth century, Limehouse Hole was built up with shipping-related enterprises. These characterized the area into the twentieth century. There were shipbuilders, barge-builders, boat-builders, ropemakers, sailmakers, mastmakers, blockmakers and ship-chandlers, as well as general wharfingers. Away from the river there were other industrial premises, and some houses, most notably on the early nineteenth-century Rosher estate.

The Riverside Area

The Margetts's Ropeyard Site

The eight acres of riverside land immediately south of the boundary between Limehouse and Poplar, empty save perhaps for a few small houses behind the river wall, were leased by Sir Edward and Sir John Yate to John Graves in 1633. Graves was a shipbuilder at the yard on the north side of the boundary, later known as Limekiln Dockyard and then as Dundee Wharf.² The northern part of this property was sublet to George Margetts and, c1650, developed as a ropemaking yard with a wharf, ropehouse, storehouse, houses and a ropewalk.³ In 1664 Samuel Pepys visited Margetts's ropeyard and apparently decided to use it to supply the Navy.⁴ The royal dockyards at Woolwich, Chatham and Portsmouth had their own roperies, but that at Deptford did not, and the Margettses were its principal suppliers of cordage in the late seventeenth century.⁵

In 1662 Margetts acquired the freehold of Graves's eight acres, with an additional 2½ acres to the east.⁶ The estate subsequently passed by marriage to Cornelius Purnell, a Portsmouth shipwright. His son sold part of

it in 1717 to Philip Willshire, who acquired the remainder in 1723.⁷ The estate passed through Willshire's family to Edward Emmett, whose heirs retained the property until 1809, when it was sold off in parcels.⁸

The number of buildings on this land gradually increased. In 1664 the Poplar Commissioners of Sewers built a storehouse south of Margetts's ropehouse, which housed the tools used by the 'marsh-men' to maintain the river wall and foreshore. Another storehouse for the same purpose was built nearby c1696.⁹ By 1694, when several leases were granted, there were more buildings. John Burford took a three-storey warehouse to store fruit for cider-making and built two more warehouses. Other buildings, including the first Marsh Storehouse, and a section of wharf with a crane, were let to Joseph Dent, a shipwright, who in turn assigned his property to Edward Terrett, a joiner, in 1703.¹⁰ Terrett built a shop and loft for Michael Upston, a blockmaker, in 1705.¹¹ By the early eighteenth century the area had become the site of a dense and irregularly grouped complex of houses, warehouses and workshops.¹² From c1730 to the late 1760s the Hudson's Bay Company held one of the warehouses, which may have accommodated ships' stores or exports, rather than imported furs.¹³

The ropeyard, which was worked by various lessees from the 1720s,¹⁴ was taken by William Moffatt c1775, and was held by his partner James Mitchell from 1778 to 1817. Sailmaking became a part of the business, and houses on the north-east side of what later became Emmett Street were converted into a three-storey sail warehouse.¹⁵ In 1799 Mitchell obtained a patent for an influential method of rope manufacture which involved greater subdivision of cables than had earlier processes, to reduce strain on the fibres.¹⁶ In 1809 his premises comprised a pantile-covered ropewalk, about 1,000ft long and flanked by spinning grounds, with a yarn house, tarring houses (rope was tarred to protect it from the effects of sea-water), a rigging house, warehouses and timber-built dwelling houses. The northern section of wharf, adjoining Limekiln Dockyard, had become a barge-builder's premises. The site south of the ropeyard buildings and north of the passage to Limehouse Hole Stairs (Thames Place) was a boat-builder's shed and yard, later used for mastmaking.¹⁷

The ropeyard was held by John Robertson from the 1820s to the 1860s, when William Henry Briant converted it to the manufacture of wire. It ceased working in the 1880s.¹⁸ The site between the ropeyard and Thames Place

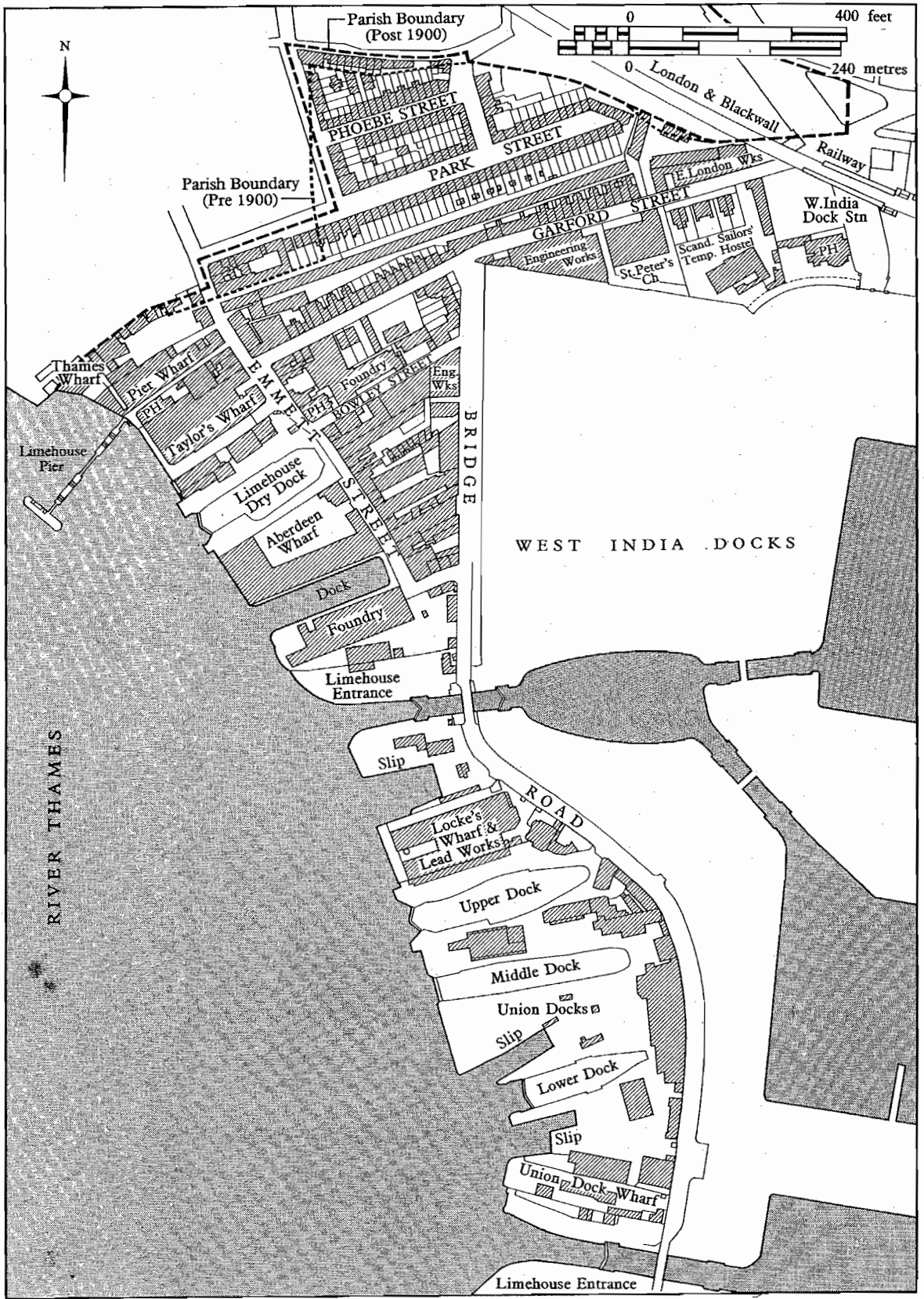


Fig. 141. Limehouse Hole area. Based on the Ordnance Survey of 1893-5

was redeveloped as Pier Wharf in 1875–6, by Tomkins, Courage & Cracknell, malt factors. Their three-storey granary warehouse was extended in 1881–2 and 1888.¹⁹ The main ropeyard site and the adjacent barge-builder's wharf were redeveloped with one- and two-storey brick sheds in 1899–1901 as the southern part of the Dundee, Perth & London Shipping Company's Dundee Wharf, most of which was on the Limekiln Dockyard site. The company expanded on to Pier Wharf in 1905, building a two-storey warehouse with cruciform-section iron columns on the ground floor. These parts of Dundee Wharf were let to the London Trading Company in 1910, for the relocation from Wapping of its River Plate Wharf, and from 1916 to 1929 were used for wrapping and packing Oxo cubes. The site was then taken back into Dundee Wharf.²⁰ All the buildings on the north side of Thames Place were cleared in 1950–1 for a rebuilding of Dundee Wharf. The river wall north of Limehouse Hole Stairs was then pushed out to align with the rest of the wharf.²¹ Dundee Wharf was cleared in 1990 for the Limehouse Link road.

The sail warehouse on the east side of Emmett Street was used by E. Speeding & Company, sail- and flag-makers, and Alfred Masson, a corn merchant, before being removed in 1946–7 to make way for an electricity sub-station. The west end of the covered ropewalk was incorporated into a contractor's yard until clearance in 1955–6.²²

Limehouse Hole Stairs and Limehouse Pier

Limehouse Hole was a plying place for watermen from the seventeenth century. There were two sets of river stairs in 1687, but only those at the end of the passage that became Thames Place survived. They are prominent in John Hood's painting of Limehouse Reach in 1768 (Plate 146b).²³ In 1843 watermen attempted to recover business lost to steamboats by erecting a floating pier at Limehouse Hole Stairs. This had evidently gone by 1860, when the Thames Conservancy erected new stairs projecting on to the foreshore.²⁴ Representations calling for a passenger steamboat service to the locality persuaded the Conservancy Board to erect a floating pier at Limehouse Hole Stairs in 1870. The pier, a walkway on three pontoons, was designed by Stephen William Leach, the Board's engineer.²⁵ It was removed in 1901 for the building of Dundee Wharf. In 1905–6 the LCC constructed a pier, consisting of two lengths of lattice-girder walkway to a pontoon, as one of several river piers erected for the 'Penny Steamer' service.²⁶ It was removed by the PLA in 1948, but the stairs and Thames Place, though closed off in 1967, survived until 1990.²⁷

The Staples's Distillery – Buchanan's Wharf Site

The riverside below Limehouse Hole Stairs was developed c1692 when Richard Staples and William

Holland built a substantial malt distillery which was enlarged c1715. North of the distillery there were at least four houses, built after the land was let to Doyla Carterton, a colourmaker, in 1695.²⁸ Near the stairs there was a public house, perhaps known as the White Lion in the late seventeenth century, later the Chequers, and then the Horns and Chequers.²⁹ The Royal Oak public house stood to the east of the distillery on the road that became Emmett Street. From c1735 Ricklas Booth & Company had the distillery, ten years later it passed to Sherman Godfrey & Company and from c1767 to c1790 it was held by Isaac Lefevre and Thomas Ayre. Hood's painting of 1768 shows the Chequers and a long barn-like building beyond, perhaps the maltings (Plate 146b).³⁰

Lefevre and Ayre probably rebuilt the distillery c1775–6, when they took a new lease. Their main building was a large three-storey brick block, in two divisions with timber internal construction.³¹ The 'maltings' was replaced by three-storey brick warehouses, one of which was 215ft by 21ft. The warehouses were let to Joseph Bramah c1799 and used for hay-pressing, presumably with Bramah's hydraulic machinery. At approximately the same date the distillery was taken by Thomas Bowman and John Garford, oil and seed merchants, who were tenants of the northernmost windmill on Millwall. Garford later gained sole control of the premises, which became a seed-crushing mill and oilcake and seed-cake warehouse, and he acquired the former hay-pressing buildings in 1835.³²

John Garford (c1772–1850) was a prominent figure in Poplar, active in the formation of the parish and the building of All Saints' Church. The road that ran from his wharf to the Commercial (West India Dock) Road still carries his name (see below). Until 1877 his family produced oilcake at what became Garford Wharf, with A. E. Burrell & Son using the eastern part of the premises as a paint factory from 1874.³³ The main buildings were sold to William Taylor & Company for use as a paint factory called Taylor's Wharf,³⁴ and the long warehouse (215ft by 21ft) was used by R. J. Hanbury for storing rice, wheat, tapioca and hops, and was known as Limehouse Wharf (Plate 42b). These wharves were combined as Venesta Wharf from 1900 to 1921 under the occupation of the Venesta Company, packing-case makers.³⁵ The Royal Oak public house was rebuilt in 1878 and No. 12 Emmett Street, just north of the long warehouse, was the United Brothers' beerhouse from the late nineteenth century until 1935.³⁶

P. R. Buchanan & Company, tea merchants, acquired Venesta Wharf in 1921, to replace a wharf at Wapping.³⁷ The eighteenth-century warehouses were extended towards Thames Place in 1924 and 1928–9 with four- and six-storey blocks, and the Horns and Chequers was demolished.³⁸ The old warehouses and the Royal Oak were replaced in 1935–7 with six-storey brick warehouses designed by Charles Dunch & Son, architects and wharf specialists.³⁹ Buchanan's Wharf was severely damaged in