

## **Industrial bread and a ship full of bombs: some reflections on history and heritage in East London**

by Patrick Wright

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Standing here beneath the towers of Canary Wharf and among the brasseries and tapas bars lining West India Quay, I am aware that it may seem frankly unworldly to suggest that we can still take our bearings from the river. Nowadays, the Thames impresses us primarily as a view: less a working thoroughfare than a silvery gleam that serves to enhance property values up and down the river. Yet it has other qualities that should be recognised as the development continues, whether in the name of the 'Thames Gateway' or of the 2012 Olympics.

When I started looking at the literature a few years ago, I found that the chroniclers of the Thames can, without too much violence, be sorted into distinct upstream and downstream tendencies. The upstream accounts tend to start at the river's physical source in the Cotswolds and then make their way down towards London. They follow the course of a steadily enlarging river, noting ancient mills and flowery water meadows, observing regattas and visiting pubs with names like the Wild Duck. Their authors may remember Hammer Horror films at Bray and appreciate the comparatively ramshackle ethos of Eel Pie Island. Yet the primary sites include Eton College and Cliveden house, Windsor Castle and Runnymede; and the whole procession tends to 'flow' as the story of a deeply settled England.

The investigators of this upstream tendency are inclined to slow down as they reach London. They attend to Westminster and the City, and they may also find quite a lot to say about the area that was long known as 'dockland' before the 's' was added in the nineteen eighties. Many of them make their final halt at Greenwich, where the classical architecture of Inigo Jones, Wren and Hawksmoor serves to reassure those who suspect they have drifted dangerously far downstream. Glancing east, in the direction of the estuary, the upstream chroniclers see profuse indications of working class labour and habitation. Beyond the sprawl, they sense an unvisited world of malarial marshes and industrial debris: a place of ruined explosives factories, isolation hospitals, prisons, oil refineries and rubbish dumps; and a notable absence of good manners, prosperity and aesthetics too.

Many of the river's upstream admirers have been inclined to take a negative view of the estuary – one which may still be active in some of the assumptions governing the promotion of the 'Thames Gateway', or the suggestion, mooted not so long ago, that the extraordinary marshes below Cliffe in Kent, would make the perfect site for a new London airport. The estuary, after all, is a place of rude mud rather than genteel limestone or

chalk. Since it fails to conform to upstream ideas of natural beauty and architectural significance, the entire area can easily be mistaken for wasteland – a vast ‘brownfield’ site, in which any form of development can only be counted an improvement.

To some extent, perhaps, the reality of the estuary confirms this upstream view. Certainly, it is increasingly hard to be sure which rise in the estuary landscape is a natural hill and which a scenically contoured heap of landfill from London. Yet for those who live in this still largely tourist-free zone, things tend to look different. From this point of view, the suggestion that the source of the Thames is to be found in a little puddle beneath an ash tree in a meadow called Trewsbury Mead in Gloucestershire – well, it can seem an unlikely tale. In the downstream perspective, the Thames owes its significance to the sea. That connection is what has made the river into a channel of history. It is significant that John Burns, the Victorian Liberal who first described the Thames as ‘liquid history’ was himself a downriver type, associated with early trade union struggles in the docks.

A key writer of this orientation is surely Joseph Conrad, author not just of *Heart of Darkness* but also of ‘The Faithful River’, a description of the estuary published in *The Mirror of the Sea* (1906). Looking at the gaps and alleys that reach down on to the foreshore through the densely clustered warehouses along the London riverside, Conrad thinks of ‘the paths of smashed bushes and crumbled earth where big game comes to drink on the banks of tropical streams’. He likens the domed storage tanks of an oil refinery near the water’s edge to the huts of a Central African village. He spies a conventionally dismal concrete factory near the Essex town of Grays, and declares it as characteristic of the Thames estuary as a palm grove on a remote coral strand. His river finds its source in the maritime routes of the British Empire: far more, certainly, than in the settled and often organically conceived England of upstream perspective.

The Thames may be ‘liquid history’, but the downstream sense of history is noticeably different. Talk to people upstream about the place they live in, and they may very well soon be talking about the value of their house. Ask people in Grays, Canvey Island, or East Tilbury about their town, and they may well start by telling you what a dreadful dump it is. Rather than taking them at their word, you would do well to recognise this reply as a pre-emptive strike aimed at disarming your own upstream prejudices. When that is done, they will often go on to reveal a remarkable attachment to their unsung place. I remember standing on the sea wall at Canvey Island, talking with Wilko Johnson, former guitarist with Doctor Feelgood. His conversation ranged over the Peasants’ Revolt, which is certainly one of the Thames estuary’s decisive moments, the fatal flood of 1953, the similarity that Canvey Island may or may not bear to the Mississippi Delta. In one of his songs, he takes Canvey Island, which generations of planners and upriver conservationists have deplored as a chaotic eyesore, and celebrates this walled enclosure as ‘Paradise’. Maybe that is the song that should be used to open the Olympics in 2012.

We should resist the inherited idea that there is less of historical significance here than in the Thames’s upstream reaches: that history in these parts has only been another name for misery and deprivation, and that massive

redevelopment can be beamed beamed in as if the whole area was a *tabula rasa*.

History has often been a curse in the East – a story of disease and hardship as much as of imperial power or great coastal engineering. Yet it has also been contrary, and it continues to resist the stories present-day interpretation would impose upon it.

I benefited from this when making a series of television documentaries about the Thames in 1999. The programmes had been commissioned to coincide with the end of the twentieth century, and we were under pressure to end with a paean of praise to the Millennium Dome. Senior figures in the BBC apparently imagined us arriving at it as if it were the last jewel in the river's crown.



I was horrified by the thought of closing on that note, but I could only avoid doing so by finding another story on the same stretch of the river. I failed to turn up any alternatives on the South side, but I did come across something on the Royal Victoria Dock more or less directly opposite the Millennium Dome. Here, in an area that had already been cleared for redevelopment, stood a vast hulk of a building, with the words 'Millennium Mills' written on it in large red letters. It seemed a remarkable coincidence. Derelict buildings can't exactly laugh, but this one was definitely smirking at the newcomer across the river. In the phrase suggested by Tim Edensor in his book *Industrial Ruins*, Millennium Mills was a place of 'involuntary' memory. Far from being a product of 'heritage' interpretation, it loomed into view from a past that remained outside the administered meanings of the present-day.

Impressed by this looming ruin, I tried to find out more about it. Nobody I contacted had much of a clue. Indeed, the planner I spoke to could only tell me what could be deduced from signs still legible on the building – that it had been a flour mill, latterly owned by Spillers. That was all I knew until I made a fortuitous discovery. Researching a completely different project, I happened upon a large advertisement featuring a drawing of Millennium Mills and printed in *The Times* in 1914.

Placed by the company that owned it at the time, Messrs Vernon and Sons, the text explained that the Millennium Mill in London was twinned with a

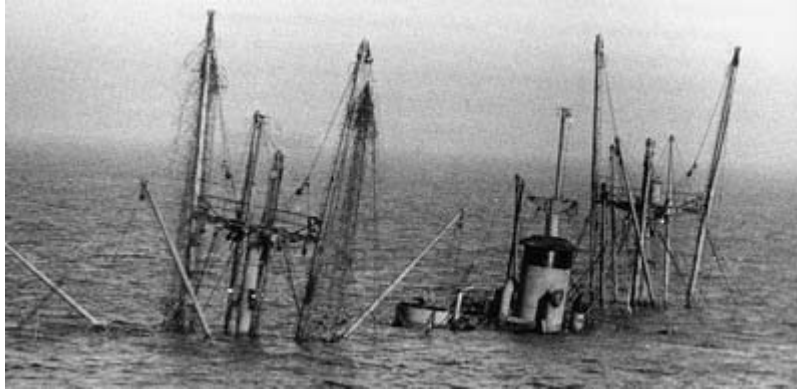
similarly vast establishment in the Port of Liverpool: 'palatial is the word that best described them.' As for the name, Vernon and Sons' most successful product had been renamed 'Millennium Flour' after winning 'The Miller' Cup in 1899. It was not just any flour either. Having been selected from 'the best wheats of the world, the grain was then put through a carefully designed industrial process: mechanically sifted with an air blast 'to separate dirt, chaff and broken grains,' scrubbed with hot water, and then dried in an immense purifying plant. Millennium Flour was a product aimed at the rising twentieth-century masses. It contained 'all the absorbable phosphates' but none of the husky and unabsorbable constituents of wheat. It was said to be particularly popular in the mining districts, where it was known to make 'beautiful white bread sandwiches'.

So there it was: a mocking warning addressed to the Dome and its boosters on the far bank of the river. This building insisted that East London had seen the millennium turn a full century before their increasingly frenzied manoeuvres. In its association with white bread, Millennium Mills indicated that the proudly announced future may turn out to be none too good for anybody's health. In its ruined and disconnected condition, it also insisted that history is not something that only exists as we chose to imagine or preserve it in the present. It can be resistant, contrary and alien too.

Early last July, at the launch of a campaign named "History Matters," Stephen Fry suggested that 'History is not the story of strangers, aliens from another realm; it is the story of us had we been born a little earlier.' That is not how it quite looks from the downriver perspective. Here, history is indeed a story full of strangeness. Fractured and often polarised between different interests and communities, it repudiates the idea of a constant and singular 'we,' and it cannot be grasped by treating it as if the past was only a flexibly cast television costume drama. No matter how skilful the conversion to loft-style apartments that awaits its redundant industrial buildings, this is a History that can't simply be reoccupied, or converted into a decorative frieze in the name of heritage. There is no moving back in, either to take the credit for its accomplishments or, the more likely mode these days, to 'apologise' for its brutalities and abuses. In this part of the world, history should be acknowledged and understood in its otherness. Indeed, it is only on that basis, that it will have anything to tell us at all.

Thanks to the scale and extent of its industrial and maritime past, the estuary is full of articulate ruins. Take the USS Richard Montgomery, a sunken American munitions ship packed with bombs and drums of phosphorus which, since the Second World War, has lain just south of Nore Sand where

the river Medway runs into the Thames.



Ordered to anchor in shallow waters as the result of an error in Southend harbour (where it is said to have arrived just as a Luftwaffe bombing raid was expected), this 'Liberty' ship got worked into the sand-bank in a spring tide, and its hull broke before retrieval was possible. Judged too dangerous to move even half a century later, the Richard Montgomery remains a well-known local feature, its masts still sticking out of the sea in its buoyed off 'Danger Area', and reputedly still capable of obliterating the nearby town of Sheerness on the Isle of Sheppey.

In the late 1970s, this 'time bomb' was turned into a symbol of 'the spiritual situation of the age' by Uwe Johnson, one of the most important German novelists of the post-war period. Having been schooled by the Nazis and then attended university in Stalinist East Germany before moving to West Berlin in 1959, Johnson went on to become famous for his remarkable novels investigating the division of Germany. Attacked from both sides of the Cold War's political division, he left Germany, first for Rome and New York and later for Kent, where he lived in Sheerness, in what was sometimes still known as the people's republic of Sheppey. More precisely, the leading novelist of the Berlin Wall lived for ten years on Marine Drive, just inside the sea wall surrounding a town that was itself partly below sea-level. Here he completed his major work, the enormous novel entitled *Anniversaries*. He also separated from his wife and daughter, suffered writer's block and drank excessively – often in the Napier Hotel, where locals knew him as 'Charles.'

Among Johnson's Sheerness writings is a yet to be properly recognised classic of downstream literature. Entitled 'An Unfathomable Ship', Johnson's article on the USS Richard Montgomery takes the side of the people of Sheppey against the history and also the successive governments that have obliged them to live with the prospect of fiery inundation hanging over their heads. On first arriving, in 1974, he mistook the slanting masts for eel traps (perhaps he remembered seeing such things on the Baltic). Locals soon disabused him of this illusion. 'However dark the cloud, it still has a silver lining,' they said, adding that in Sheerness, much of which is below sea level, the cloud was the sea that had flooded the town in February 1953, and which would return sporadically to do the same until the present sea-wall was built. The silver lining was the Richard Montgomery. Known as 'our wreck' and 'the Grand old Lady of the Thames,' it was also identified, by the residents of a town that has little claim to anyone's idea of the tourist trade, as 'our only spectacle.'

If this 'unfathomable' ship blew up, which even the responsible authorities admitted was possible, it would surely devastate Sheerness and cause serious damage as far away as Sittingbourne. It would engulf the Isle of Grain with its oil refinery directly across the Medway from Sheerness; and it might also, so local speculation claimed, strike a passing oil super-tanker with a fireball, initiating a chain reaction that could ignite the even greater quantities of oil and methane gas stored on the Essex shore around Canvey Island. As for the tidal wave likely to follow any such explosion, that would pour up the Thames towards London – although, as Johnson noted drily, 'the Houses of Parliament were unlikely to be affected.'

People around Sheerness were accustomed to counting up the ways in which the Richard Montgomery might be prompted to explode. The catastrophe might be triggered by accidental impact with a passing ship (Johnson claimed that 24 near collisions had already been logged), by bombs falling on one another as intermediate decks collapsed, or by pressure waves from low-flying jets. It might be set off deliberately by students (as had been promised in a rag week stunt in 1969), by an obstinate philologist determined to test the saying that 'whoever sets the Thames on fire will perform miracles,' or by a suicide 'afraid of being lonely.'

Johnson died in Sheerness in March 1984. Though a roughly edited translation had been published in *Granta* a few months previously, his article on the USS Richard Montgomery remains too little known here: a downstream allegory, in which history is treated not as a diverting costume drama or as reassuring evidence of 'our island story.' In the perception of this German refugee from both Nazism and Stalinism, history persists as a submerged and unmanageable charge. More of a curse than a decorative blessing, it lies there as unfinished business that still has the power to blow up in our faces. That, surely, is history in the downriver style. In my view, it should be acknowledged as such, and not hidden under a polite and reassuring 'heritage' frieze.

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Fuller accounts of Millennium Mills and USS Richard Montgomery appear in Patrick Wright, *The River* (1999).